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INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

STUDENT ACCESS
AND SUCCESS

EDITED BY
CHRISTINE FONTANINI,
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International Perspectives on Gender and Higher Education

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International Perspectives on Gender and Higher Education: Student Access and Success

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Foreword

Feminist Imaginings Challenging the World of Academic Capitalism for Gender Equality in Global Higher Education

Miriam E. David

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed major global changes in economies, higher education, political systems, and social structures. A key transformation is the involvement of groups other than traditional upper and middle class men in universities and other higher education: groups such as women, disadvantaged, poor and working-class men, racialized, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups, those with physical or invisible disabilities and diverse sexualities, as students, faculty or academics, and staff. Globalization is the term most commonly associated with these international transformations, although there are significant differences between countries, particularly those of the global south as compared with the global north (Connell, 2007). The question of whether these various and varied changes lead to greater equities, equalities, or inequalities between groups or social classes is a question that is taxing many social researchers, as well as politicians (Burke, David, & Moreau, 2019; David, 2018; David, Burke, & Moreau, 2019).

The worldwide changes for both students and academics in higher education have been enormous (David, 2016a, p. 50; David & Amey, 2020). In the United Kingdom alone, there are more than 2 million students in higher education, making for a massive increase in participation, such that females are in the ascendance. The worldwide increases have been fivefold, making higher education a major component of global economies. Women account for a majority of students in most countries, and this is part of an increase of around 500% in enrollments over less than 40 years (1970–2009). UNESCO commented that

...the capacity of the world's education systems more than doubled—from 647 million students in 1970 to 1,397 million in 2009 ...[and] from 33 to 164 million in higher education.

(UNESCO, 2012, p. 9)

They went on to say that

...female enrollment at the tertiary level has grown almost twice as fast as that of men over the last four decades. The colleges, schools, and universities to which students now go vary greatly, as do the students themselves.

There are, however, major methodological and theoretical issues to be resolved over how to interpret these developments. On the one hand, the statistical approach to assessment or evaluation of changing forms of participation in higher education, now known as metrics, has been increasing and used as a policy tool internationally. On the other hand, this methodological approach has been critiqued by feminists as “misogyny masquerading as metrics” (David, 2016a). All theoretical approaches involve personal and political values, relating to views about the family, gender, political, and social structures of society. Very often, however, the underlying values are occluded or relate to the traditional social and political order. Taking a feminist perspective foregrounds women as integral to the analysis (David, 2018). This could lead to the question of whether it is possible to single out the impact of these various changes on how well girls or women do in relation to access to, involvement, or participation in higher education and subsequent family and employment, including employment in higher education. How important is an intersectional analysis to this: in other words, are issues of social class, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicity (BAME) and/or race, religion, gender, family, and sexualities interlinked in this analysis? Intersectionality as a methodological approach was first proposed by the Black American feminist legal scholar, Kimberley Crenshaw, over 30 years ago, about various forms of stratification and their intersections and social and cultural effects (Crenshaw, 1989/2017).

Taking a feminist methodological approach to studies in higher education draws on the political project of feminism. This arose out of the civil, social, and human rights movements of the last third of the twentieth century (especially initially in France and the United States) and was closely linked with the growth of student participation in higher education. One aspect of this ongoing feminist project has been to try to transform women’s lives toward gender and social equality into the twenty-first century. As I argued:

...this is fundamentally an educational and pedagogical project: to understand how the current gender, sexual and social structures have come about and to develop the knowledge and wisdom to further that understanding and to transform such relations in the direction of what has become known, in the twenty-first century, as gender and social justice. It has been a project increasingly in universities, as higher education has expanded, with changing socio-economic and political systems globally.

(David, 2014, p. 1)

The overarching question about the nature and character of the expansion of global higher education has engaged and troubled scholars for over 75 years, given that, in 1945, there were only 500 universities and in 2019 there were over 10,000 according to UNESCO (Redding, Drew, & Crump, 2019, p. vii). This expansion has been considered the massification of higher education or the creation of massive universities versus universities for the masses (Langa Rosado & David, 2006, pp. 343–365). Rosado and I considered that “the masses” were groups of people, women included, who had previously been excluded from elite forms of higher education, namely the prestigious universities. In our case, we considered universities in Spain and the United Kingdom. There are now, internationally, very large institutions, catering for large swathes of students from a diversity of social class, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and gender or sexualities, but these institutions remain stratified by their elite and privileged status (Langa Rosado & David, 2006). The majority of students in elite and traditional universities come from the middle classes rather than the poorer or working-class backgrounds (Archer, Hutchings, Leathwood, & Ross, 2003), even though there has been an expansion of provision for women students.

There are many explanations for these transformations with agreement about globalization and the technical revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT) (Redding et al., 2019). Whether or not this can also be considered “academic capitalism,” a term coined by the American feminist scholar Sheila Slaughter, with colleagues Larry Leslie and Gary Rhoades, is more contested, calling into question changing political values around corporatization, individualism, marketization, and neoliberalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Slaughter and Leslie (1997) illustrated how the expansion of higher education was intertwined with the developments in capitalism and the particular political forms of neoliberalism. The thesis was that the expansion of the university together with economic development was not about increasing equality but about the growth of new markets and new social relations within economic development. In their analysis, this constituted a major shift from the post–World War II emphasis, in the majority of industrial countries or those now known as the global north, on public investment in the expansion of education, including higher education, as a means of developing social equalities and social mobilities. They went on to show how rapidly this transformation was taking place not only in the United States but also internationally. In a subsequent study Slaughter with another colleague Gary Rhoades wrote an extended analysis entitled *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: markets, state and higher education* published in 2004 that illustrated quite how advanced the new system of capitalism entwined with higher education had become internationally.

They also argued that equality, fairness, and social justice as political values have been downgraded in the pursuit of more business or corporate approaches to global economies. There is also the question of the impact and influences of the changes on socioeconomic and structural factors including the participation of women and people from disadvantaged groups such as those in poor regions, Black and minority ethnicities (BAME), social class, and other diversities and

sexualities. These latter are not a dominant consideration, despite the international policy changes to increase access and participation from disadvantaged groups. The policy changes arguably for increasing equality and social justice have therefore had complex implications despite the exponential growth in overall participation in some form of higher education (David, 2018). It can, in fact, be argued that the expansion of global higher education in the twenty-first century has led to increasing inequalities between countries and regions, social classes, gender and sexualities, and other diversities.

Student Access to and Participation in Higher Education: Issues of Gender Equality

Widening access to and participation in higher education emerged as a major policy concern for the UK New Labour government (1997–2010), as in many other countries mainly of the global north, connected to longer histories over struggles for the right to higher education, to concerns for greater fairness in society, and to try to ensure that higher education is more equitable and inclusive (Burke, 2012). It also wanted a different approach to expanding higher educational opportunities to fit with global economic expansion. Thus, major political contentious debates were set in train about academic excellence versus educational achievement, which had implications for how to implement fair access and widening participation. It also meant that the question of which kinds of student to include was debated: and the criteria for choice.

Widening participation in higher education was not a new policy mantra in the twenty-first century. Indeed, ideas about how to make educational opportunities more equal or equitable for various groups such as those in poverty, economically or socially disadvantaged, or on the basis of being working class, from an ethnic or racial minority, and according to gender, had been a policy theme throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Initially, though, it was a theme applied to reconstructing secondary and compulsory education, rather than access to, or participation in, higher education. Widening access and participation was also shaped by the growing diversification of student groups that have resulted from higher education expansion over the later decades of the twentieth century. Widening participation, often shortened to *WP*, gained discursive hegemony, and this discourse has gained momentum internationally. However, the discourse is highly contested within and across different national contexts, and there is no one agreed definition. There are also different associated policy discourses, such as equity, social mobility, social inclusion, and social disadvantage.

For example, Reay, Davies, David, and Ball (2001) observed how applicants to higher education from working-class backgrounds often stress the importance of locality and community in their decision-making process and the sense of security, comfort, and familiarity generated through these localized expressions. Ball and Vincent (1998) highlight how students from middle-class backgrounds are often able to draw on both the formal forms of “cold” or official knowledge available as well as “hot” knowledge—the knowledge available through informal

social networks. Students from working-class backgrounds usually do not benefit from access to “hot” knowledge about higher education and therefore must rely on official forms of “cold” knowledge, which might be challenging to access and decipher (Burke, 2015, 2017).

In the aftermath of the UK Labour government’s specific policy to expand and regulate undergraduate student access to and participation in different types of higher education, through the 2004 Higher Education Act, studies were commissioned (David et al., 2010). These were because of the acrimonious debates surrounding the questions of access to and widening participation in higher education, whereby the aim was to ensure 50% of the relevant age cohort participated in higher education. The UK Government through its Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) with its major educational research program—the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP)—committed £2 million funding for the research and I was appointed to direct the studies (David et al., 2010, p. 14). We wrote (David et al., 2010, p. 13):

Over the last forty [1970–2010] years, the overall numbers of undergraduate students participating in some form of higher education has quadrupled from half a million in 1965, to two million in 2005–6 (HEFCE 2005a). As Hayward and colleagues go on to argue: ‘educational participation beyond the compulsory school age has increased in the UK since 1945, with a massive increase in full-time provision between 1985 and 1994’. Moreover, over the years from 1996–7 to 2005–6, in absolute terms, women outnumbered men and are 60 per cent of full-time student population in UK universities with some variations in English, Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh forms of access and participation.

We elaborated this (David et al., 2010, pp. 7–8):

The UK government, during the first half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, has been eager to develop and extend learning opportunities for both young people and adults, across their life course, *to ensure that the education and skills base of the UK economy is internationally competitive...* Deploying new ideas about forms of governance and what have been called new managerialism or neo-liberalism has meant that a variety of new and innovative approaches to education and individual or personal learning opportunities have been tried and tested...

Understandings of the meanings of fair access and widening participation were extremely eclectic and not at all concerned with altering existing power relations. There was contestation between meanings of educational achievements and “fair access.” Seven studies were commissioned through the TLRP ranging from

statistical to qualitative studies of diverse participants in higher education and including one study of a community where adults did not necessarily participate in higher education. The main aim was how to improve learning by widening participation to higher education. The studies all focused on questions of “transforming institutional practices and on developing appropriate and sustainable pedagogies for social diversity and learning across the life course” (David et al., 2010, p. 180).

The implication for the future which came out of these seven fine-grained and sensitive policy-oriented studies was to “argue for the centrality of educational opportunities across the life course to ensure that they are aligned to men and women’s changing socioeconomic and family circumstances” (David et al., 2010, p. 180). An array of inclusive and personal pedagogies was suggested that might engage students of the future in educational courses and new or innovative subjects, going beyond the twentieth century. This also had implications for social mobility and how to change circumstances for underrepresented groups in an entirely new light. We stated (David et al., 2010, p. 201):

Finally a vision for fair access, equity and diversity in participation in the global academy would surely incorporate the uses of critical and connectionist pedagogies, including developing inclusive and yet personal pedagogies to ensure people’s lives across the life course were enhanced and improved...If we value inclusion, teachers, practitioners and policy-makers should maintain high expectations of all students as learners, whilst recognising the diversity of their needs, cultures and identities.

This was but one policy-related program of research to consider how to engage and involve different kinds of students from the more traditional 18-year-old white male student in higher education. Only one of the considerations was the question of involving more women students, and that was not a paramount consideration. Together with Burke and Moreau and others, I have considered how the changing context and transformations of higher education have implications for equity, social, and gender justice. Policy reforms driven by intersecting political forces are profoundly reshaping global higher education (Burke et al., 2019; David et al., 2019). Burke, Moreau, and I also considered the international statistical and social evidence to show how white middle class male privilege remains entrenched in complex ways in new forms of higher education. We have written extensively about the impact of such changes on equity in higher education and on women in particular (see for example Burke, 2012; Burke, Crozier, & Misiaszek, 2017; Burke et al., 2019; David, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). This has included attention to gendered and sexual violence (David, 2016b).

We also explored this in relation to ongoing structural inequalities and how patriarchal discourses work with neoliberalism to reproduce continuing, and generate emerging, forms of difference and inequality in and through higher education (David et al., 2019). This takes place in a context in which structural

inequalities, such as gender, class, and race, are seen to have been erased and symbolic inequalities, that are associated with women and femininities, are made invisible through discourses that assert a logic of gender neutrality (Stambach & David, 2005). We also discussed how being caring and having caring commitments are dispositions that carry little value in the often seen as gender-neutral institutional spaces of universities. This is shown most clearly through the pursuit of an uncritical notion of excellence and the approaches to pedagogies. Explorations of, for example, how student parents are treated “carelessly” or without care, as are how the majority of academic staff have become precarious workers, while privilege remains for White middle-class men in power (David, 2016a; Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Women and Gender Equality among Academics and Researchers in Higher Education

The massive expansion and transformation of global higher education has affected both the institutions that provide teaching, learning and research, and who becomes a student (Archer et al., 2003; Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007). Inevitably, this also affects who becomes an academic, across changing subjects and/or disciplines. Very little commentary has been made of the specific gendered and linked social characteristics of the students, their teachers, and the institutions. However, equality or the obverse, inequality in higher education, is still largely considered in gender-neutral terms. For example, as recently as October 2017, Roger Brown defined inequality in higher education as income inequality, relying on studies by the OECD (2011), to support his arguments and evidence (Brown, 2017). He argued that the huge growth in income inequality in most Western economies over the past 30 years or so was linked to the growth in higher education. He supported this by considering the development of global markets or neoliberalism in higher education and separately the notion of institutional developments and the ways in which higher education institutions had responded to the growth in global markets. Gender was not once mentioned and nor were ethnicity or race, although his book is about the implications for socioeconomic equalities.

Global expansion has led to increasing inequalities, including, but not only, for women (David, 2016a, p. 51). While women have secured a foothold in universities, not only as students but also as academics, they remain belittled and subject to forms of sexual harassment, rather than being treated as equals. This is what some have called the feminization crisis (Morley, 2011). With the expansion of universities, and the growing presence of women at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as well as among academics, we have also witnessed the rise of feminism, as a form of critique of traditional academic knowledge and activism to transform women’s oppression in society. Feminism has taken diverse forms in the various countries of the global north with strong critiques of the differences between white and black feminisms, for instance. Heidi Mirza (2018a, 2018b) recently argued about the contestations between these diverse forms of feminism, drawing on her work over a 20-year period (Mirza, 1997).

There are also contestations about how to typify forms of feminism within higher education. What is often called second wave feminism arose out of the women's liberation movements (WLM) of the 1960s and 1970s (David, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). First wave feminism, by contrast, largely arose in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, focusing upon political, economic, and social changes for women's emancipation. This first wave was largely through the suffrage movements, as Banks (1986) has argued. The various arguments about how feminism has influenced both the sociopolitical and economic changes into the twenty-first century and the forms of academic knowledge developed to underpin these movements are also heavily contested stories (David, 2016a, 2016b). Nevertheless, the thread is one of the two forms of feminism: liberal or socialist.

In 2014, I undertook a study of over 100 feminist activists in the arts, humanities, and social sciences in international academia, to capture the views and values of these intergenerational and emerging feminists (David, 2014). The journeys of these 110 international educators were presented, grouped into three different generational groups, using the methodology developed by the feminist sociologist of education, Olive Banks (Banks, 1986). The three groups were those born between 1935 and 1950; 1950 to 1965; and 1965 to 1980. While these three groups are now senior and not younger generations, they do illustrate both the expansion and impact of higher education in women's lives and their limitations on involvement. All subscribed to the notion of being a feminist activist or educator and discussed how they engaged with feminism within higher education or outside. The older generations were relatively more politically engaged whereas the younger were more theoretically inclined.

In a subsequent study, I focused on just the feminist educators within the study of over 100 international academics: these were over a third (David, 2016b, pp. 89–125). I looked at how these women negotiated higher education, given that it “is typified by a misogynist or sexist approach within higher education management and leadership” (David, 2016b, p. 89). There were international networks of the participants in the study, although they were mainly resident in the United Kingdom at the time but had come from a large range of disparate countries. This makes it clear that there is a diversity of countries of residence, which is not at all continuous with countries of origin. The study was made up of a diversity of women academics, across the generations and ages, and also extremely varied in terms of their social and geographic locations: illustrative of the mobile, transnational academics who are characteristic of the overall academic profession in the twenty-first century (David, 2014, p. 17, 2016b, p. 100; Kim & Brooks, 2013).

Neither particular individuals nor institutions were targeted, but given research interests and predilections, it is not surprising that the study had many participants who saw themselves as feminist activist educators or academics. “Education feminists” was the term coined in the United States for the group who are committed to and publishing in feminist studies of education and gender (Stone, 1994). Over half the women from the first cohort, with three-quarters from the second, and the vast majority of the youngest were identified as part of this group

(David, 2016b, p. 101). There remain clear social class differences in origins and approaches to feminism, gender, and education.

The notion of social class used was drawn from the participants' own accounts, in replies to online questions or through interviews, given that they were all social scientists and were involved in using such notions. Family backgrounds were defined not only by parents' social class as being about income or means but also by occupation, with many women having parents who were either schoolteachers or university professors. This turned out to be significantly more usual than expected, especially in relation to "education feminists."

Indeed, one of the major transformations of higher education over the last 50 years, responsible for the increasing numbers of women as students in higher education, has been the incorporation of teacher education as an undergraduate study, with different patterns of types of teacher education across different countries in separate colleges or linked with other types of professional work (Acker & Wagner, 2019). Many of the participants in my study also had parents, mothers especially, who had participated in teacher education, not then named as higher education, and so were not (technically) "first-in-the-family" or "first generation" to go to university, although they felt it to be so. All evidence was through self-identification.

In a subsequent study, with Pam Alldred and others, funded by the European Union (EU) through its Daphne program attending to violence against women and girls (VAWG), we considered how to challenge gendered violence, bullying, and sexual harassment through higher education. Questions about gender and sexual relations, VAWG, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse are now more overtly in the public eye, globally, nationally, and locally. The question of why these issues are now more in the public eye is not clear, although it may have to do with both feminist activism and the transformations in culture, social media, and communications, contributing to new forms of capitalism and the commercialization of gender and sexuality as new forms of sexualization. Such violence against women and sexual harassment is no longer seen as just a problem for the global south but also the global north. But the roots of such gender-related violence are not adequately tackled and remain side-lined in political discourse.

In *A Feminist Manifesto for Education* (David, 2016b), I address the ways in which feminists in the academy have developed analyses of gender and education and, separately, gender-related violence. I also considered the above research study with Pam Alldred on how to challenge gender-related violence for children and young people. This education and training project was based in four universities across Europe, namely in Ireland, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

Improved knowledge and understanding were essential for "youth practitioners" to better identify and challenge sexist, sexualizing, homophobic or controlling language and behavior, and know when and how to refer children and young people to the most appropriate support services.

(David, 2016b, p. 40)

There has been increasing levels of attention to issues of sexual violence in higher education over recent years, as its prevalence has become increasingly visible. There are clearly few political solutions that tackle the roots of this VAWG as forms of abuse of male power or patriarchy and misogyny.

On the contrary, gender mainstreaming as a policy notion became more commonplace in the early twenty-first century, in response to growing economic and social demands for women's involvement in employment and politics. The institutionalization of some feminisms and the mainstreaming of their demands (Walby, 2002) affected changes in political rhetoric. Among other things, they led to greater attention to the use of sexist and homophobic language (Millns & Skeet, 2013) and they were useful when it came to certain gender politics. However, the institutionalization also brought about a cooptation of many feminist claims (Montoya, 2009). This is well illustrated by the mainstreaming of the term "gender." On the one hand, the use of the concept made it possible to recognize the sociocultural norms and values, pressures and incentives involved in constructing gendered subjects, and binary, heterosexual order. On the other hand, the term is frequently used to dismiss the necessity of feminist analysis. In fact, it is mostly employed in mainstreaming policies that tend not to be sensitive to central feminist issues in regard to power, hierarchies, and difference (Biglia, Olivella-Quintana, & Cagliero, 2015). Furthermore, the frequent use of gender-neutral language in laws produces inattention to gendered power relations (David, 2016b, pp. 65–66).

In recent times, there have been feminist contestations on university campus particularly over sexual harassment among students and training students to challenge sexual violence and between feminists as academics and students. Some of these contestations are very unfortunate and have become public media debates between waves of feminists on campus, showing how feminism per se has been brought into public disrepute (David, 2016a, p. 174). Yet feminist campaigning has successfully exposed sexual assault or harassment, rape culture, or lad culture on campus, although policies remain woefully inadequate, not only for students but also for women and feminist academics (David, 2016a). The old liberal-humanist arguments about how universities are spaces for creative thinking and allow for academic freedom and/or freedom of expression are being eroded in the neoliberal university. Even more importantly, new quasi-legal notions of radicalization are also having an impact on campus cultures and constricting and confining sociocultural debates.

There is an increasingly overt sexualized and laddish culture on campus, particularly, but clearly from above, not only among students. This has been the subject of increasing amounts of feminist research to try to make the campus safe for students and for others, including in developing policies dealing with sexual assaults, harassment, and a rape culture. Issues of campus safety are, however, only just beginning to be part of more inclusive gender policies internationally. British policies remain muted, although there have been some recent institutional responses to developing lessons in *sexual consent* for

incoming undergraduate students. This is in contrast to the policies on rape and sexual assault on campus that the then US President Obama tried to initiate in 2014. Nevertheless, although in the public eye and with official sanction, these remained highly contested questions and few campuses in either the United States or United Kingdom have developed clear and comprehensive guidelines for dealing with these issues either for students or for academics (David, 2016b, pp. 184–185).

A Feminist Critique of Leadership in Higher Education

It seems clear that there is a toxic mix of globalization and changing gender and sexual relations, especially in higher education. Louise Morley (2012, p. 29) argued that part of the problem in higher education was “the cycle of domination of top roles by men in universities.” She continued that it was important to transform that vicious cycle in higher education to make education, and higher education especially, less misogynistic.

Morley has been a particularly strong critic of developments in the neoliberal university. In particular she has argued passionately about the moves toward creating new metrics (a term that is itself a twenty-first century neologism) and the numbers game is a form of misogyny posing as measurement. She also suggests that it is important for feminist academics to consider how to change the rules of the (patriarchal) game (Morley, 2013) so as to have a more gender appropriate future for universities. The contested nature of global changes especially around gender equality in education, including in higher education, means that the ideas have become emasculated rather than feminized by incorporation into neoliberal global universities.

Yet, as Morley (2011) has shown, most countries of the global north have developed policies for gender equity in the public sphere and education; and many countries of the global south also have developed frameworks for gender equity in public life and higher education. Based in Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) at the University of Sussex, she has conducted many innovative studies of global higher education. For example, one study of gender equity looked at examples from the global south, namely two African countries—Ghana and Tanzania—in terms both of widening participation and of how gender is done, undone, and redone in higher education via policies, practices, and the micro-political relays of power.

In another study, Morley (2013) argued trenchantly about how new managerialism and the so-called “leaderist turn in higher education” are subverting and reinforcing the rules of the game in patriarchal ways. She provided

...an international review of feminist knowledge on how gender and power interact with leadership in higher education... to unmask the “rules of the game” that lurk beneath the surface rationality of academic meritocracy.

She further argued (Morley, 2013, pp. 116–131) that:

...curiously, in a culture of measurement and audit in higher education, women's representation in different roles and grades is not always perceived as sufficiently important to measure, monitor or map comparatively...The data that do exist suggest that women disappear in the higher grades...This under-representation reflects not only continued inequalities between men and women, but missed opportunities for women to influence, and contribute to universities of the future.

Blackmore and Sachs (2007), two critical feminist researchers, based in Australia also undertook a major international study of how neoliberal changes were impacting upon forms of leadership and management in different forms of education and higher education. Entitling their study *Performing and Reforming Leaders: Gender, educational restructuring and change*, they clearly demonstrated that the concept of gender institutionalizes forms of change and does not necessarily lead to reverses in patriarchal power in educational institutions. What they focused on were the ways in which emotions were handled in education and how this linked with collective feminist work. In a subsequent critical piece, Blackmore (2013) developed her feminist perspective on educational leadership, particularly here with respect to universities. Again, she illustrated the diverse notions of leadership in higher education.

Conclusions about Women, Gendered Involvement, and Participation in Higher Education

Drawing on feminist critiques to shed light on complex and diverse inequalities in higher education, I have shown how gendered inequalities continue to intersect with other forms of difference despite decades of higher education policy focused on equity and widening participation. I have discussed and analyzed the emergence of widening participation and equity policies in many countries of both the global north and the global south, often for both social and economic reasons. Yet this is in a context where intersecting forces of globalization, neoliberalism, and marketization have repositioned students as consumers of the market of global higher education, leading to an individualizing focus on student access and participation, without attention to the contextual and structural inequalities that profoundly undermine institutional commitment to equity and widening participation. The individualist discourses have implications for students' experiences of higher education in relation to the different social location and in relation to the gendering of education, work, and family, reinforcing patriarchal assumptions that universities should be "careless" (Lynch, 2010; Moreau, 2016) and privileging the productive over reproductive dimensions of social life (Burke & Jackson, 2007). I have tried to show the power of feminist analyses of questions of equity, excellence, and WP to bring to light the ways that gendered, classed, racialized,

and sexualized or intersectional inequalities are reproduced and exacerbated rather than eroded through the neoliberal, patriarchal university.

The array of research papers included in this volume edited by Paivandi, Fontanini, and Joshi will contribute greatly to furthering knowledge about the diverse impacts of the varied changes in global higher education have on *female students* in a range of countries from both the global south and the global north. Given that the countries range across Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe, there is much nuance about the specificities, recent developments, and impact of the marketization about *the presence of girls* in higher education. This project includes countries that are not traditionally covered by this higher education research and will reveal fascinating insights into the workings of patriarchy and misogyny in relation to regimes of higher education. It takes as a central emphasis the colonial developments from France and other European countries. It focuses on a French colony in Africa (Cote D'Ivoire), and in Asia, Iran, and two countries of the Indian subcontinent (Bangladesh and India), two countries of Latin America (Brazil and Colombia), both linked to the two countries of the Iberian peninsula (Portugal and Spain), with the other European countries being Flanders, Greece, and Hungary, and only two other countries of the global north, namely Canada and Japan. The tendency is therefore for a balance toward cultures and ethnicities not central to previous research on gender and higher education. Nevertheless, this is limited to studies of women students, although conducted by researchers in higher education.

Through feminist perspectives, I have shown that neoliberalism, corporatization, and managerialism or academic capitalism work together with patriarchy to perpetuate and generate new forms of inequality and power relations. New managerialism and the so-called leaderist turn in higher education aimed at gender equity are subverting and reinforcing the “rules of the game” in patriarchal ways. Indeed, the effects of neoliberalism and managerialism have been to confine women to relatively junior academic positions and rarely the most senior leadership positions. Furthermore, tenacious feminist campaigning has successfully exposed sexual assault or harassment on campus and cast a light on how policies have not adequately protected female students and academics (David, 2016a).

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International Perspectives on Gender and Higher Education: Student Access and Success

The proportion of girls in tertiary education has grown steadily in different continents for several decades. Since the 1990s, more women than men have completed higher education in most countries. According to the most recent available data,¹ there are more women than men graduating from tertiary education in four out of five countries (80%).² Despite improved access to higher education, the distribution of women and men varies considerably across the different fields of study. It's the same for the higher education level attained by women and men.

Women are less likely than men to pursue PhD programs and fields of research. Women outnumber men to obtain a bachelor's degree (undergraduate level 6 of ISCED), men making up 47% of graduates and women 53% in countries for which data are available. Women are also more likely (55%) to hold a master's degree (ISCED level 7). On the other hand, men represent 54% of graduates of PhD programs (ISCED level 8) and 71% of all researchers. Women are more likely than men to graduate in five major fields of higher education: education; letters and arts; social sciences, commerce, and law; natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics; and health and social protection. Men make up the majority of tertiary education graduates in three broad areas: ICTs; engineering, manufacturing, and construction; and agriculture. In these fields, there is a significant imbalance between the sexes in engineering, manufacturing, and construction.

Historically, women's access to higher education has been a phenomenon of the twentieth century. Women were excluded from higher education prior to nineteenth century. The few women who were able to enter university during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (Juliana Morell in Spain, Anna Maria van Schurman in the Netherlands, Ursula Agricola, Maria Jonae Palmgren, and Aurora Liljenroth in Sweden, Elena Cornaro Piscopia, Laura Bassi, and Cristina Roccati in Italy, Elizabeth Blackwell in the USA, Natalia Korsini in Russia, Mary Putman and Julie-Victoire Daubié in France) were pioneers

¹See UNESCO. (2016). *The Global Education Monitoring Report 2016: Gender review*. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246045>

²<https://www.tellmaps.com/uis/gender/?lang=fr#!/tellmap/79054752?lang=fr%20eAtlas%20Unesco>.

belonging to privileged social groups. All started with the entry of a few women into certain sectors of higher education in Europe and in North America and the creation of establishments reserved for women like Bedford College in London (UK), Georgia Female College of Macon (USA), Oberlin College in Ohio (USA), Women's College Hospital (Canada), and Bethune College (India). It was from the middle of the nineteenth century that European universities began to allow women to enroll in different fields, a situation which is explained by the transformations observed in the European education system, in particular in secondary school, became accessible to a large number of young girls. However, it was from the 1930s and especially after the Second World War that girls massively crossed educational and social barriers to pursue studies and moved into leadership positions in higher education.

Progress in access to higher education seems to be the result of socioeconomic, cultural, and sociological developments observed in different parts of our planet, although their extent varies from one country to another and from one region to another. High school is often democratized in most countries and the labor market often observes permanent feminization. Some countries have put in place a set of egalitarian policies to improve the presence of women in secondary and higher education. Even if the concrete effects of these policies are not measured, the willingness of public policies to promote parity between girls and boys seem to influence the general social context and changing attitudes. In a significant number of countries, it is the social dynamics and the mobilization of women that explain some of the progress made.

Recent evolutions show that the social relations of sex, marked by the balance of power that organizes society, are not fixed once and for all in their forms, their scale, and their effects. There is a space of change within societies opening the way for a gradual transformation. However, the different dynamics of improving the presence of women in the different sectors of higher education seem to vary considerably from country to country. One of the frequently mentioned issues concerns gender inequalities in terms of social origin and regional and ethnic disparities (ethnic and religious minorities, immigrant populations).

A very large number of researches have attempted to gain a better understanding of the meaning and reasons for gendered orientations in higher education, particularly the low presence of girls in certain scientific and technical disciplines in North America and Western Europe. Curiously, in some developing countries where there is recent feminization, the presence of women in technical and scientific disciplines is less unequal. This sociological analysis focuses on the social construction of gender differences and on the weight of the economy, culture, religion, legal setting, and the internal dynamics of societies. Sociological studies on gender generally dismiss the idea of a fact of nature that would lead to a division and complementarity of gender roles both at school and in society. Several hypotheses are advanced by the research work: the weight of sexist stereotypes, the representations of gendered social roles, the gendered socialization of young people within family context, the sexual division of fields of knowledge and skills, the structure of the labor market, the role of the school with differentiated expectations on the part of the teachers according to the disciplines and

gender of the pupils, the non-neutrality of the curricula and the textbooks, and the hidden curriculum. But, beyond cultural, social, and economic barriers, access to higher education can be for many young girls a path to more power and more emancipation. Knowledge has become more than ever a power in society and the economy based on science and education. The individual and collective mobilization of women and a new awareness of gender issues seem to contribute to changing the social context and encourage girls to go further in access to education and the labor market.

The book focuses mainly on the situation of the females without considering the debates and research concerning the academic staff (except in direct relation with the students). An international comparison makes this volume interesting in view of the specificities of each country, and the imbalance in access for women to the different fields that show the convergences and divergences at the international level. The book presents a critical and objective analysis of this question while referring to research carried out in different countries on issue of the feminization of higher education.

In total, scholars from 15 countries representing four continents participated in the production of this work. The foreword is written by Miriam E. David.

Miriam E. David (University College London (UCL), Institute of Education, UK) in her foreword of the book reaffirms the phenomenon of massification of higher education. She notes that globally there has been a phenomenal improvement in enrollment in higher education in general and that for women in particular, from among the nontraditional socially diverse groups. The author assesses in an intriguing manner whether this rise in enrollment of socially diverse groups was an outcome of the need for equality and social justice or just a form of academic capitalism enabled by expanded market access. She emphasizes on how structural inequalities and patriarchal discourses are often disguised behind the assertion of gender neutrality. Drawing from her comprehensive empirical research evidence across various studies, the author further elaborates on the evolution of various forms of feminism within higher education until the recent time. She also laments the fact that women are largely missing in the leadership roles in higher education given the gendered inequalities with consequences on academics and students alike. In conclusion, she justifies the need for the book and the gap that it is expected to fill in the existing body of literature on feminism in higher education. In particular, she emphasizes the relevance of the inclusion of chapters from countries belonging to geographically widespread continents and with diverse socioeconomic and patriarchal scenarios.

Kurt De Wit and Tom Bekers (KU Leuven, Belgium) explore gender inequalities in higher education in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking Community of Belgium), thereby distinguishing between type of institutions, fields of study, and level of educational attainment. They turn their attention to the public policy on gender issues, the measures the government has taken to reduce gender inequalities in the student population, and the effects they have had. According to the authors, the question of gender-imbalanced student influx has seldom been addressed in Flanders. Most attention is given to raising awareness about and

challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Policy in Flanders with regard to gender imbalances in the student population in higher education to date seems to have difficulty in finding the right balance between a labor market perspective and a student-centered perspective, between short-term labor shortages and long-term societal changes, between initiatives focusing on awareness, culture, and initiatives aiming to bring structural changes. For the authors, what is needed is a more inclusive approach, encompassing all gender imbalances on both sides of the equations.

Georgios Stamelos and Georgia Eleni Lempesi (University of Patras, Greece) note that Greece never had an active policy for women's participation in higher education and the labor market. This political absence was changed after the abolition of dictatorship (1974) and more actively after the integration of European Union (1981). The authors point out the significant quantitative advances in the presence of girls in higher education that have been accomplished, but the disparities remain inside the higher education. This means that social, cultural, and economic stereotypes persist and are present. Particular attention was paid to the structure of the labor market because women's participation has increased over the time but simultaneously it is less than men's participation, less dynamic, and limited to selected sectors. The elements of analysis converge to affirm that women's participation in the economy appears to be more difficult to succeed in equal terms than the participation in education in general and more particular in higher education.

Christine Fontanini and Saeed Paivandi (University of Lorraine, France) show in their chapter on France that a lot of progress has been made in the feminization of higher education. However, girls have limited access to certain prestigious fields and institutions, which play an important role in the distribution of powers within society. The authors wonder about an important observation: how, despite the existence of social relations of sex, girls have been able to improve, for more than half a century, their presence in higher education and higher professions which they rarely attended or not earlier? The most recent studies have explored new themes which are interested at the same time in the contextual, personal and subjective characteristics. For example, the feminization of higher education can be analyzed by taking into account the specific dynamics of women and their individual and collective awareness of the challenges of education and knowledge in order to assert their place in society. In the learning trajectory, there is always a subject, therefore a form of consciousness which participates in giving sense to learning. Choosing a field of study, developing an intellectual or professional project, and learning constitute an experience lived by a learner who has a subjectivity. Learning sometimes involves going beyond of inherited representations and mobilizing to learn otherwise. The text of the chapter proposes to reflect on the reciprocal interactions between the feminization of society as a global process and the feminization of higher education.

Istvan Polonyi and Tamas Kozma (Institute of Educational Studies, University of Debrecen, Hungary) in their chapter on Hungary attempt to analyze the transition of a post-socialist country and the fact that the feminism of the state-socialist period was replaced by familism after the change of regime. The higher

education policies of the past decade have led to a decline in the proportion of female students. The chapter reveals that support for female students in higher education is also fundamentally “familial,” and very little is done to increase the proportion of women in higher education or to promote Roma girls’ access to higher education. The authors severely criticize the government policy, characterized by the elimination of gender majors in public higher education, and the position of Hungarian women in terms of education, health, employment, and wages, besides extremely poor in terms of political and economic leadership.

Chiara Biasin (University of Padua, Italy) and Gina Chianese (University of Trieste, Italy) try to contextualize women’s access to higher education in Italian society and in Europe and assert that their road has been long and not without ambiguity. The authors propose a holistic approach to understand the gender (in) equality question and the impact of different elements and variables in this process. They insist on the role of parents and teachers, curricula and guidance, stereotypes about male and female roles and functions. In other words, gender (in) equality is not simply a question to be solved in a restricted area (such as wages, education, etc.) but it requires the cooperation of institutions and stakeholders at the European and national, civil society, and community levels. Supporting the empowerment of girls and women does not mean taking power from men and giving it to women. Gender equality means empowering everyone, guaranteeing a win-win approach to improve society and the broader community.

Elisa Chaleta (University of Évora, Portugal), João Pissarra, and Jorge Correia Jesuino (University of Lisbon, Portugal) stress that despite social advances, the rights conquered, the increased presence in higher education, and the higher qualification of women in Portugal still reflect a set of stereotypes that are manifested, more or less consciously, in job market. According to the authors, a lower number of young women drop out of school at early stages and a higher number complete higher education, being clear the major role that females have in the education field today. There are no constraints to women’s access to higher education and are more qualified than men today. When we look inside the institutions, we observe that there has been a move toward greater numerical parity but there is still a discrepancy when we look at the place of women in management and at strategic levels.

Alejandra Montané López (University of Barcelona, Spain), José Beltrán Llavador, and Daniel Gabaldón-Estevan (University of Valencia, Spain) emphasize outstanding growth gender equality in Spain since the beginning of democracy, with developments in the civil, political, and social rights of women. The authors show how the instruments of equality policies have diversified, from plans to laws and gender units, generating advances in public policies against gender inequality. Two types of segregation are highlighted in the text of the chapter: a horizontal or quantitative segregation, which occurs to the extent that some areas of knowledge are very feminized while others are very masculinized; a vertical segregation that occurs in all fields, regardless of the degree of feminization of university students because there are very few women in the highest positions of science, even in the fields in which women have already made up the majority among graduates. According to the authors, the various obstacles that

Spanish public universities face even today in terms of equality, as well as the difficulties in incorporating specific programmes to benefit the development of women in their professional careers, slow down the achievement of substantive equality between men and women.

Rumana Ahmed (Monash University, Australia) and Nelia Hyndman-Rizk (University of New South Wales, Australia) assess the women empowerment through anomaly between higher education attainment of women and their labor force participation in Bangladesh. An empirical assessment is explored through a case study of a women's college in Northern Bangladesh. Authors attempt to examine the instrumental and intrinsic women empowerment in view of higher education attainment. In particular, five factors have been examined in detail viz, the quality of education, existing social norms, household dynamics, limited legal awareness, and job market aspirations. However, the lack of preparedness for the job market resulted in the prevalence of an "instrumental deficiency" in the higher education attainment of women in Bangladesh. The authors recommend that men should be facilitator and not act as barriers in higher education attainment of women and thereby their empowerment and agency development.

Saeed Paivandi (University of Lorraine, France) and Yasmin Nadir (CNRS, France) describe the feminization of higher education in Iran in the context of paradoxes and complexities. The authors appreciate that access to higher education for women has increased and is at par or greater than that of men in most of the disciplines except engineering and at various levels of education. However, a gendered quota in higher education linked with job market access for women exists in Iran. It is noted that the access and attainment of specific subjects in higher education are strongly linked with the prospects in the job market. While in the skilled job market women are giving greater competition to men, but the rate of unemployment is greater for women below the age of 30 as compared to men even though they possess higher education credentials. The chapter reflects upon various factors that have influenced the aspirations and motivation for women to pursue higher education including the tradition of *Mehrieh*. The chapter also reflects how Islamization of higher education has affected its various avenues like curriculum, daily processes, and making Hijab mandatory. To be specific, it has worked against the "democratization and gender justice" for women. The chapter concludes with a belief that women's access to higher education can enhance women's agency by influencing various sociocultural nuances of more inclusive and just societies.

Yukari Matsuzuka (Hitotsubashi University, Japan) highlights that amidst an increase in women enrollment in higher education in Japan, the enrollment of women in fields like sciences and engineering and at masters' and doctoral levels are in favor of men, biased against women. The author further describes the government incentives to motivate women participation both in the labor market and in higher education. The labor market in Japan is characterized by income disparities biased in favor of men and against women largely due to shorter tenures. "Interruptions" in the career path in the form of childbirth and child-rearing result in high turnover for women or for a compromise in the form of temporary or part-time job preference. Considering the rewards in the labor

markets and discrepancies between male and female incomes thereby, the author argues that women can opt for a more rewarding career. Consecutively, the author identifies those career that allow women to return to their career after interruptions easily and with higher salaries. It has been envisaged that portable and occupation-specific skills provided by higher education would be more favorable for women to pursue a career after interruption. It would give greater mobility to women with lesser dependence on a particular firm or employer. Strategic choices at higher education level considering specific skills acquisition can convert the challenge in the form of interruption for women into an opportunity in the form of improved mobility and higher returns for aspiring women.

K. M. Joshi (Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji Bhavnagar University, India) and Kinjal Ahir (Sardar Patel University, India) begin the chapter on India by providing a historical perspective of the status of women in Indian society. It gives a brief overview of the status of women during contemporary times with regard to health, political participation, legal provisions for the protection of women's rights, and educational status at school level. Although India has achieved complete parity in terms of access between men and women in higher education, a lesser number of women are enrolled in professional courses like engineering, polytechnic, and business administration. Marriage, social traditions, patriarchal norms, and the associated responsibilities remain the prime reasons for dropouts in higher education across various age groups. In contrast, motivation from parents and in-laws, a strong aspiration to pursue an economically rewarding career, desire for economically and intellectually independent life, and subsidized education were some of the reasons narrated by the respondents for pursuing higher education. India needs more apposite and effective policies to make the women participation in higher education socially inclusive and to achieve the equity in both participation and outcome of higher education.

Nobah Céline Sidonie Koco Epse Kacou-Wodjé (CAMES' Universities and Ecole Normale Supérieure in Abidjan) shows that despite better results of girls of the scientific baccalaureate in high school than boys, they continue less in STEMs in higher education especially in mathematic-technology and mathematic-computer science. According to the author, there is an effective students' self-censorship that is due to multiple factors: cultural, educational, psychological, and economic despite numerous efforts made by national institutions and especially the Association of Women Researchers of Côte d'Ivoire (AFEMCCI) to encourage young girls to choose scientific fields. Moreover, the author stresses that girls that choose both scientific studies and professional studies take risks in order to find a job and succeed in it unlike boys, who benefit from a high and respectful social position. Thus, it is obvious that these studies and positions are not opened yet for women in the Ivorian society.

Silvana Rodrigues de Souza Sato, Mariele Martins Torquato (Campeche College, Brazil), and Ione Ribeiro Valle (Federal University of Santa Catarina-UFSC) analyze access to higher education at the national level and in the case of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) according to gender factor. They observe a greater access of women to higher education in the country, in contrast to UFSC, but it is the men who have achieved greater success. The

authors attempt to also show that democratizing access to higher education is an important but not a defining part of social justice in education. Gender struggles in the fields of professions are very directly associated with class struggles, because for women, the highest admission courses are those with low social and economic value, such as the Pedagogy course. According to the authors, despite advances in the democratization of women's access to Brazilian higher education in recent years, there are many social barriers that the country has to fight against, mainly through public policies.

Lina Uribe-Correa and Aldo Hernández-Barrios (Konrad Lorenz University Foundation, Colombia) highlight that since the early 1990s, in Colombia, as well as Chile and Mexico, the number of women accessing higher education has been bigger than men. Nevertheless, the imbalance of women's presence exists within specific fields of study such as ICT programs, Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction, and in general, in STEM fields despite efforts of Professional and Science Associations to promote gender balance in higher education. Concerning education level, the percentage of girls enrolling in bachelor's degree is higher than boys, but equivalent in master's degree and lower in PhD program. Furthermore, only half the individuals who enroll complete their programs and obtain educational degrees. As a consequence of this dynamic, only about 25% of the number of aspirants graduate from higher education in Colombia in time. The chapter highlights that men are most widely affected with the attrition phenomenon, as they have higher overall dropout rates, in general, by modality of teaching and education levels, with the exception of technical professional education. The abandonment of STEM programs is similar between men and women and is of a great magnitude. According to the author, Colombian women have occupied a larger number of places in the labor market but they still earn less than men in general, with all levels of education. This pattern is repeated within diverse fields of knowledge and specific disciplines, showing that there is an imbalance that has been hard to overcome.

Shirin Abdmolaei and Goli M. Rezai-Rashti (Western University, Canada) analyze the feminization of higher education in Canada with paradoxes. Since the early 1990s, women in Canada have accounted for a majority of full-time students' enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. But their entrance into traditional male disciplines, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), is still greatly lagging behind men. Moreover, the female students who pursue a STEM degree do not always complete their degrees, which speaks of the social and structural barriers that often impede upon women's educational success and opportunities. The authors point out that when racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences are considered, not only differences with regards to which disciplines women pursue are observed, but also are noticed disparities in terms of access to, and success in, higher education as well as educational outcomes with respect to employment, income, and holding senior leadership positions.

Chapter 1

A Difficult Balance: Policies on Gender Imbalances in the Higher Education Student Population in Flanders

Kurt De Wit and Tom Bekers

1. Introduction

Gender gaps in higher education have over the years been documented extensively. With regard to the entrance of students to higher education, in general, women have reversed the gap in OECD countries and their share of first-time new entrants is now larger than that of men (OECD, 2019). This does however not mean that gender differences are no longer important in higher education. The share of women is unevenly distributed in different fields of study, with an underrepresentation in STEM and an overrepresentation in health and welfare, and tends to decline with the education level (highest share in short cycle programs below bachelor level, lowest share in programs at master level, and underrepresentation at the doctoral level; OECD, 2019). Conversely, when it comes to completion rates, it is the men who are doing worse, and this is true across all OECD countries (OECD, 2019).

The situation in Flanders, i.e., the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium, on the whole follows the same patterns. Women make up 55% of the total enrollments in higher education, with their share declining according to the education level, and with a clear underrepresentation in STEM fields of study (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2018a). When in higher education, women do better than men, attaining 58% of bachelor and master degrees (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2018b).

In this chapter, we explore gender inequalities in higher education in Flanders. We focus on the contemporary situation of students in higher education. We first describe the current situation in Flemish higher education, thereby distinguishing between type of institution, field of study, and level of educational attainment. Then we go into the public policy on gender issues and the measures the government has taken to reduce gender inequalities in the student population. Third, we turn our attention to the level of the higher education institutions and the gender policies they have put in place. We take stock of some of the initiatives

taken and the effects they have (or have not) had. We give some specific examples from KU Leuven, in order to provide a detailed account of the issues that are at stake when tackling gender inequality with regard to students in higher education. To round up the chapter, a critical conclusion is drawn on the persistence of gender inequality in higher education and the different ways it keeps on challenging higher education policy in Flanders.

2. The Current Situation in Flanders

The higher education system in Flanders is in essence a binary system consisting of universities and universities of applied sciences. In recent years, a number of changes took place within this structure: some study programs were transferred from the universities of applied sciences to the universities, teacher training programs in adult education institutions were replaced by master programs at universities and universities of applied sciences, and study programs on ISCED level 5 were introduced in universities of applied sciences. These changes have however not changed the overall gender balance in higher education with women currently making up 55% of total enrollments and earning 58% of degrees (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2018a, 2018b) as stated in the introduction. In that sense, the democratization in HE might seem completed in terms of gender. But these overall figures hide many imbalances between types of institutions (universities vs universities of applied sciences), fields of study (STEM vs others), and levels of educational attainment (ISCED levels 5, 6, 7, and 8).

Female students are in the majority in both universities and universities of applied sciences in the academic year 2019–2020 (overall figures for ISCED levels 5, 6, and 7 combined). In universities, their share is 54%, in universities of applied sciences it amounts to 56% (AHOVOKS, 2020). In universities, the share of female students was larger than that of men for the first time in the academic year 1996–1997, whereas it was always larger at universities of applied sciences (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2019). This difference is related to the educational offering of both types of institutions, i.e., the different fields of study in which they offer study programs and also the different levels at which they offer these programs (ISCED levels 5 and 6 at universities of applied sciences, ISCED levels 6, 7, and 8 at universities).

Regarding fields of study, most attention has recently been directed at STEM, in Flanders as well as internationally. STEM stands for “science, technology, engineering, mathematics.” Note that the definition of what constitutes a STEM study program can differ between different sources. In the so-called STEM Monitor (Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2019), it is explained that differences between OECD figures and Flemish figures stem from the fact that in Flanders not only STEM “in the strict sense” is considered but also “study programs with a STEM component,” for example, biomedical sciences (classified internationally in “health”), traffic engineering (“transport”), or medical imaging (“health”). But all figures point in the same direction: in the STEM fields of

study, girls are clearly underrepresented with regard to enrollments as well as the number of graduates – while labor market demand for graduates in these fields is high (Vlaamse Regering, 2012). In recent years, the share of females in STEM study programs has increased to around 24% in professional bachelor programs (at universities of applied sciences) and 39% in academic bachelor programs (at universities; Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2019). The share in professional bachelor programs has however not been a steady increase. Moreover, the study efficiency in these programs has declined (Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2019). The number of female graduates in all STEM bachelor and master programs is slowly increasing and now amounts to one-third of STEM graduates in Flanders (Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2019).

Above it was already hinted at that the issue of gender balance plays out differently at different ISCED levels. At ISCED level 5, 45% of enrollments are by female students (AHOVOKS, 2020). At ISCED level 6, Flanders differentiates between professional bachelor programs (with a vocational purpose) at universities of applied sciences and academic bachelor programs (as preparation for entering a master program) at universities. The student population in professional bachelor programs is 58% female, while this is 53% in academic bachelor programs. In master programs, the share of female students is 55% (AHOVOKS, 2020). When looking at the level of the doctorate, however, the ratio is turned the other way round, with 45% of doctorates awarded to women (in 2017–2018) and 55% to men (ECCOOM, 2019).

This sudden change from a majority of women in master programs to a majority of men in doctoral programs is a first “leak” in what is known as the “leaky pipeline”: the share of women decreases in each further phase of the academic career. In 2019, 39% of the postdoc positions in Flanders were held by women, as were 37% of the (tenure track) assistant professor positions, 31% of the associate professor positions, 26% of the professorships, and 17% of full professors (in FTE; VLIR, 2019). Although the share of women in all these positions is increasing steadily, the change is very slow. It should be borne in mind that for some faculties and disciplines, it is not self-evident to remedy the “leaky pipeline” with regard to academic positions because their influx of graduated master students is already imbalanced: on average more women than man graduate, but this average hides big differences according to study field.

In sum, despite overall figures showing that women have closed the gender gap in higher education with regard to enrollments and degrees, in several ways, gender gaps are still apparent in Flemish higher education. This is not to say that higher education is entirely to blame. It is a societal problem and gender differences in education manifest themselves already from secondary education onwards, although at that level the boys are the group that deserves attention because girls are more present in tracks preparing for higher education and also have a higher study success (Vlaamse Overheid, 2017). In any case, given the situation of persistent gender imbalances, it is useful to look at the policies that have been proposed and implemented in Flanders to tackle this problem.

3. Policies and Initiatives in Flanders

The participation of women in higher education grew exponentially in the 1960s and 1970s. In this first wave of democratization of higher education, social class, economic status, and gender became less important as reasons why people did not participate in higher education. Moreover, the education level acquired became one of the key determinants of labor market participation (Pelleriaux, 1998). Nevertheless, this evolution did not signify the end of inequality in higher education. The social and economic background of students remained a factor determining participation in higher education (Tan, 1998). And as we have seen above, gender imbalances have remained persistent as well.

It begs the question, therefore, what the Flemish government's stance has been on gender inequalities in higher education. Is there currently a public policy on gender issues and has the government taken the measures to reduce gender inequalities in the student population? In responding to these questions, it is important to keep in mind that the policy process in Flanders involves participation of the stakeholders in education, through their representative organizations. There is a Flemish interuniversity council (*Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad*, VLIR) and a Flemish council representing the universities of applied sciences (*Vlaamse Hogescholeerraad*, VLHORA). More to the point in this case, the Flemish Education Council (*Vlaamse Onderwijsraad*, VLOR) played an important part in putting gender issues on the agenda. The Flemish Education Council is the body representing the educational providers, the staff, the students, the socioeconomic organizations, and the sociocultural organizations. In many cases, its advice is an obligatory step in drawing up new legislation, but it can also address policy issues on its own initiative.

In a broad sense, the gender issue is well acknowledged within education policy. For instance, breaking down tables according to gender is a standard practice in publications of the government and of other actors. The yearly publication of educational statistics by the government (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2020; or for an overview in English see Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2019) is a case in point.

But on the other hand gender imbalances in the student population in higher education are seldom taken as an issue on itself. There are, for instance, few specific reports, or position papers, or policy texts – some reports on gender in a STEM context notwithstanding, see below. And when the issue is taken up separately, mostly the perspective taken is that of labor market needs. For example, in 2012, the then Minister for Equal Opportunities proposed to develop an action plan to address the career gap between women and men. Although this action plan was never actually realized (Vrouwenraad, 2019), some preparatory steps were taken (see Sels, 2012; SERV, 2012; VLOR, 2012). The preparatory documents started from the observation that there was a (too) large vertical and horizontal segregation on the labor market and pointed out the close relation between career gap and education gap: to really address the career gap, it would be necessary to tackle gender segregation in education too. In a similar vein, the shortage of graduates in STEM fields of study was addressed from a labor market

perspective. The Flemish Government drafted an action plan with regard to STEM (Vlaamse Regering, 2012) that defined the “STEM problem” on the basis of two questions: Is there a sufficient number of employees with a STEM training on the labor market to meet the demand? And are the competences of STEM graduates sufficiently aligned with the demand from the labor market?

The labor market perspective is however not necessarily the right way to look at gender issues in the higher education student population. The Flemish Education Council posed the question to the minister “to what extent the labor market driven measures in national and international goal frameworks are in line with the key purposes of education” (VLOR, 2012, p. 6, our translation). The Flemish Education Council’s starting point was the pedagogical mission of education, that is, personal development and critical-creative integration in society. And it referred to other complimentary goal frameworks rather than economic frameworks such as the Lisbon goals of the European Union: to guarantee equal opportunities, to prepare students for economic autonomy, to foster social cohesion, and to stimulate lifelong learning (VLOR, 2012). From this pedagogical perspective, the Flemish Education Council implied that the room for maneuver is rather limited. It contended that a more equal participation of men and women in different fields of study should never be a goal in itself, but could be an effect of study choice guidance. It further clarified that the curriculum and the pedagogical and didactical methods used by schools should lead to the defined minimal goals, including awareness of perceived gender roles and stereotypes, regardless of gender ratios in study programs (VLOR, 2012). In other words, it ruled out the number of enrolled women and men in study programs as a valid indicator of a good choice of study.

Moreover, the Flemish Education Council defined the link with the labor market as problematic in itself. It did not deny that preparation for the labor market should be a goal, among other goals, for education. But it contended, first, that there is a lack of information about the relation between a specific study program and one or more professions, and second, that it cannot be expected that a choice for a particular study program automatically implies a choice for a profession to which that study program prepares (VLOR, 2012).

A final point the Flemish Education Council made was that gender is not an issue that stands on its own, but intersects with other factors influencing the educational career as well, such as the education level of the parents, the socio-economic situation, the language spoken at home, and cultural capital (VLOR, 2012). These background characteristics and the interplay between them define to a certain extent the study choice process and study success or failure.

The Flemish Education Council concluded that not sex or gender or gender stereotypes should lead study choice or study choice guidance, but talent. There will always be different opinions about gender and its relation with certain professions, but being aware of gender stereotypes and their intersection with other background characteristics could prevent these stereotypes of being the basis for study choices.

In about the same time period, the issue of gender imbalances in academic staff and university boards and councils was once more brought to the attention of

policymakers in Flanders. Since equal numbers of male and female professorships and equal representation of men and women in the decision-making boards and councils remained a distant dream – with a rate of progress toward gender balance in professorships somewhere around 2050 – the government proposed to install quota for some advisory and decision-making bodies by law. Having serious concerns about the feasibility and efficiency of such a radical measure, the Flemish Interuniversity Council countered this call for quota by launching a “gender action plan” (VLIR, 2013). This action plan focused on structural change in organizational culture and structure, therefore relying on the engagement of the universities themselves. This action plan did not, remarkably, refer to gender imbalances in higher education study programs and the effect this can have on the influx in faculties and disciplines. Its successor in 2019, the “gender in academia” charter of the Flemish Interuniversity Council and *Jonge Academie* (an organization of young academics within the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts), does acknowledge the differences in gender imbalances between scientific disciplines, albeit in an implicit way, as something to keep in mind when monitoring the current situation and progress (VLIR-JA, 2019).

As mentioned above, in Flanders gender segregation in the student population in higher education is rarely named as a theme in itself. One of the reasons is because of the intersection with other themes, like national origin, and the focus on “diversity” and “inclusion” in general, which are more dominant themes in Flanders today (SERV, 2018). UNIA, for instance, an independent public institution which aims to combat discrimination and promote equal opportunities, advises in its diversity barometer (Unia, 2018) to work toward an inclusive culture by challenging segregation in education but does not mention gender as a segregating theme. Segregation is defined on the basis of socioeconomic status, national origin, health, or handicap of students. With regard to gender, the diversity barometer only mentions that gender stereotypes that lead to certain study choices should be addressed.

Another reason is the lack of explicit visibility, general awareness, and sense of urgency on this particular matter. An interesting exception is the “gender monitor” published by the Flemish Government in 2017 as part of its equal opportunities policy (Vlaamse Overheid, 2017). In that document, the societal position and participation of men and women is charted in areas such as health, income, labor market, and poverty. The monitor explicitly highlights gender inequalities and all the forms it takes in Flemish higher education, in a separate chapter on education. The chapter works its way to higher education by first describing gender differences in secondary education: in the choice for an area of study and a particular study, in reading and mathematical literacy, in problematic absences, and in unqualified dropout of secondary education. Most of the gender issues higher education faces can already be perceived in secondary education. In regard to higher education, first the gender segregation in the student population is discussed in detail on the level of the biggest study fields (in terms of student influx) of bachelor and master programs combined, thereby also distinguishing between universities and universities of applied sciences. Second, it is shown that women outperform men in all of these study fields. Next, the monitor establishes

that the percentage of female teaching staff diminishes as the education level rises. The last paragraphs of the chapter discuss the education level, reading literacy, mathematical literacy, and “aspirations” of the general Flemish population, establishing among others that Flemish women in general have attained a higher level of education and more often participate in posteducation training programs than Flemish men. The monitor even explicitly mentions targets, but does so only with regard to STEM study programs in secondary and higher education.

The explicit attention for STEM is not a unique feature for Flanders. At the European level, there seems to have been a momentum for the broader theme of gender inequality in higher education about ten years ago, when, for instance, a report issued by [Eurydice \(2010\)](#) concluded that gender inequality was a concern in many countries. But the same report came to the conclusion that overall policies were often missing, as a result of (1) the differences in comprehensiveness of legislative and policy frameworks, (2) the main focus on challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and (3) the variety of policy instruments different countries developed, while lacking more general strategies.

In Flanders too, an overall policy seems to be missing. As stated above, a labor market perspective seems to be dominant. The European Union’s so-called Lisbon strategy to make Europe the most competitive economy in the world also supported a focus on economic growth and jobs ([European Commission, 2000](#)). From this, a focus ensued on the overall number of STEM graduates, and on the gender imbalance among STEM graduates. In line with the Lisbon strategy, Flanders launched a STEM action plan in 2012 introducing long-, mid- and short-term goals for STEM programs in both secondary and higher education ([Vlaamse Regering, 2012](#)). For the latter, it means that by 2020, the number of female students in professional and academic STEM bachelor programs should be 25.2% and 33.5% respectively, and the market share of academic STEM bachelor programs should be 33.02%. In regard to these goals, a “STEM monitor” was developed and published yearly (for the latest edition, see [Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2019](#)).

Now that the end date of the action plan is near and the goals are very likely to be met ([Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2019](#)), plans are being developed for a second, more ambitious action plan for the period 2020–2030 ([Vlaamse Regering – STEM-platform, 2019](#)). The Flemish Education Council has already provided an advice on its own initiative ([VLOR, 2019](#)). The goal of the proposal is to broaden the scope with a view on increasing STEM knowledge overall, that is, to provide an essential STEM literacy to all students, scholars, and civilians in general. A multifaceted training offer is envisaged, to provide for “STEM for specialists” as well as “STEM for all” ([Vlaamse Regering – STEM-platform, 2019](#), p. 9).

Note, however, that the proposal is not to broaden the scope to non-STEM study programs. Of course, the proposal was drafted by a STEM steering group and was focused on an action plan for STEM. But it seems a missed opportunity that the gender issue in non-STEM study programs was not taken into scope by, for instance, the Flemish Education Council, which could have led to a more inclusive approach addressing all gender issues in the student population in higher education.

To sum up, a general awareness of the gender issue in higher education is certainly present in Flanders. The government and the stakeholders regularly address gender aspects in policy proposals. However, with regard to gender imbalances in the student population in higher education, there is no encompassing policy and the initiatives taken clearly start from a labor market perspective. The latter has led to actions focused on STEM, with relative success on a general level.

4. Policies of Higher Education Institutions: The Case of KU Leuven

The relative absence of gender policy measures on the Flemish level with regard to students in higher education means that higher education institutions in Flanders are not particularly incentivized, but neither discouraged to take action themselves concerning this issue. It is therefore interesting to look at that level to see whether policies and measures with regard to gender imbalances in the student population have been taken and if yes, which effects these initiatives have yielded.

In order to provide a detailed account of the issues that are at stake, we focus on one university in Flanders, namely KU Leuven. This university is the biggest in Flanders with about 60,000 registered students. It is a comprehensive university offering academic bachelor and master programs in almost all fields of study, on nine campuses spread around Flanders. Figures provided below are our own calculations, unless otherwise stated.

In the academic year 2018–2019, KU Leuven on the whole had a balanced influx of students in bachelor programs, with 48% male students and 52% female students. Nevertheless, these figures vary considerably between study programs. The gender composition of the bachelor programs ranges on average from 3% to 97% female students (and vice versa). Moreover, these ratios are persistent. In the bachelor program in informatics at the campus in Kortrijk, for instance, only two women enrolled in the last ten years, while 63 men started in the program. An example in the other direction is the bachelor program in speech therapy and audiological sciences at the campus in Leuven, which enrolled 21 men compared to 779 women in that same period.

More in general the figures show that in the academic year 2018–2019 of the 72 Dutch-language bachelor programs offered at KU Leuven at the different campuses, no less than 19 have a student influx composed of more than two-thirds of men, and in 22 programs new enrollments comprise more than two-thirds of women. If two-thirds is taken as a maximum to speak of a “gender balance” (because you need at least a representation of one third of a minority group to be able to actually instigate a change in culture or structure, see, e.g., [Dahlerup, 1988](#); [Kanter, 1977](#)), this means that only 31% or 43% bachelor programs have a gender balance. This has not always been the case at KU Leuven. In the academic year 1992–1993, for instance, the share of ISCED 6-level programs with a gender balance amounted to 63%. The share of unbalanced programs, and particularly the number of programs with an overrepresentation of women, gradually grew. Since the academic year 2012–2013, balanced programs are a minority.