**2024 EDI CONFERENCE**

**Stream Proposal**

**EDI Certifications: Advancing Gender Equality or Genderwashing?**

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"It is remarkable how quickly all strata in public universities—staff, faculty, administrators, students—have grown accustomed to the saturation of university life by neoliberal rationality, metrics, and principles of governance.”

–Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, 2015 (p. 198)

Both academia and corporate settings have seen an increase in so called ‘EDI certifications’ of various forms. Companies proudly exhibit stamps of approval showcasing them as ‘equal opportunity employers’, ‘equality champions’, ‘woman-friendly’, or ‘great places to work’. Certification programs for organizations are now offered by some of the top business schools and universities in the world, while academia has its own versions, ranging from national, government-sponsored accreditations to international ones, such as Athena SWAN offered by Advance HE (<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter>). Gender equality has become big business, especially at a time when universities’ Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) and visible progress on these plans is tied to funding. A GEP is now a mandatory requirement and an eligibility criterion for all public bodies, higher education institutions and research organizations from all EU member states and associated countries wishing to participate in Horizon Europe, for example.

This stream seeks contributions around a fundamental question: ***To what extent are these certifications advancing gender equality?*** Do the programs force universities to fundamentally change practices, processes and hidden gender biases? Or, are they just another manifestation of a far-reaching ‘audit culture’ that contributes to the ‘spreadsheet ideology’ now prevalent in university settings (Muller, 2018)? Are certification programs another aspect of the metrics-driven neoliberal university? Do they simply act as paradoxical genderwashing mechanisms, thereby further inhibiting the exposure of bias they claim to uncover? Yarrow and Johnston (2023) claim, for example, that the gender agenda has been co-opted by the neoliberal agenda and ‘rather than contributing to transformational change, (certifications) serve as an affective tool for institutional reputation gains’ or what they call ‘institutional peacocking’ (p. 757).

Several universities and companies are currently undergoing certification for good EDI practices. Most often, the people called upon—or offer to volunteer—to assist with the certification are women. As Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) note, much equality work is undertaken by marginalized individuals and groups and it is usually women who take on the burden of participating in these ‘gender equality certifications’. Paradoxically then, as Yarrow and Johnston (2023) also point out, women’s role in these programs further disadvantages their individual career progress, since the endless hours they devote to ‘equality work’ is seldom recognized in formal evaluation processes.

Organizations remain an important location for male privilege and dominance and universities are no exception. Yet, gender neutrality is assumed, not only in regard to structures, processes and practices in the running of higher educational institutions but also in ‘audit exercises’ that have become increasingly common. In audit exercises such as the REF and TEF in the UK, male privilege and power has gone unquestioned, while larger issues of control, exploitation and democracy at work, as often discussed in the context of these audit exercises, have assumed a curiously a-gendered perspective. In addition, an increasing body of work shows that journal metrics, including impact factors and citation indexes, follow gendered patterns, largely the result of gender bias: female authors are less likely to be published in high-impact journals, receive lower acceptance rates, and are less likely to be cited by others. Witteman et al (2019) provide evidence that gender gaps in research funding are primarily attributed to evaluations of the applicant rather than the quality of the scientific projects. In turn, such decisions disadvantage women in promotion and tenure reviews, hiringdecisions and grant proposals (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2013; Smith, 2006).

Are EDI certification programs, including those for higher educational institutions, advancing gender equality? Or, are they another form of box-ticking that sidetracks the equality agenda? This stream invites a discussion around these pertinent questions, both from academics and practitioners who may have had experience with the certifications or who may be interested in pursuing a certification. Submissions are encouraged within a diversity of topics surrounding certification, especially from a critical lens, but also from an empirical or methodological one.

Please send submissions to [alexiap@ucy.ac.cy](mailto:alexiap@ucy.ac.cy) following the submission guidelines and deadlines. The recommended abstract length is 3-5 pages.

**References**

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