

Engaging With Sex, Gender and Sexuality Diversity at Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract : Dominant discourses constitute heterosexuality as natural, normal and the only legitimate sexuality, and diverse sexual subjectivities as abnormal, unnatural and socially taboo. Similarly, the cisgender subject is reified. There are ongoing debates about the inclusion and suitability of sexuality education in the school curriculum and research show that teachers are not adequately prepared to teach about such issues in the classroom. Not surprising then, that many young people enter these institutions having had limited previous exposure to, or education about, sex, gender and sexuality diversity. This paper discusses the presence of heterosexism and cissexism at multiple layers in higher education institutions, impacting students and staff. Increasing knowledge and awareness of sex, gender and sexuality diversities is also crucial to challenging existing perceptions of sex, gender and sexuality diversities that marginalise and subordinate a large proportion of students and staff. There is a persistent disjuncture between dominant discourses that generally position higher education institutions as socially progressive, open environments and the discourses that legitimate the ascendancy of heterosexual and cisgender identities. This paper argues that such disjuncture must be addressed by providing inclusive physical and emotional spaces if universities are to affirm every individual and produce graduates across all disciplines with the cultural capability to engage with increasingly diverse communities. Given the key role of language in shaping cultural and social attitudes, using gender-inclusive language is a powerful way to promote gender equality and eradicate gender bias. This means speaking and writing in a way that does not discriminate against a particular sex, gender or sexual identity and does not perpetuate gender stereotypes. Individuals must be allowed to present themselves and identify in ways they choose and be addressed by their chosen pronouns.

Keywords : heteronormativity, inclusivity, gender, universities

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