

Title: The gendered landscape of UK higher education: do men feel disadvantaged?

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Abstract: The landscape of UK higher education (HE) has changed significantly over the past decades. Key shifts relate to the changing gender balance of the undergraduate student body and to emergent gender gaps in retention and attainment. Men are now less likely to access HE, complete their degrees or achieve 'Upper' degrees. There has been minimal empirical exploration of men's perceptions of the current gender patterning of HE, and none focusing on the extent to which they identify as a minority, or experience minority disadvantage, within this context. This study explores these questions via analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from 333 male and female survey respondents. The findings suggest that men do not recognise themselves as comprising a disadvantaged minority within HE, and that both men and women perceive that women face greater challenges because of their gender, both during their studies and in relation to post-degree life chances.

Keywords: higher education, men, women, gender, minority status.

The gendered landscape of UK Higher Education

The gendered landscape of UK higher education (hereafter HE) has changed significantly over the past two decades. Men working within HE still form the majority of academic staff, and enjoy a pay premium; they are particularly over-represented amongst professorial staff and senior managers (ECU 2015a). However,

since the early 1990s, women are now more likely to attend university than men (ECU 2015a; HEPI 2009, 2010, 2016). For some years now, women have comprised approximately 57% of each consecutive undergraduate cohort (ECU 2015b; HEA 2014); although men still form the majority of students in the highest-tariff institutions (HEPI 2016). The percentage of students who are male has increased slightly (approximately 1%) since 2003/4 (ECU 2015b), but some have estimated that, in the next decade or so, the UK - and several other OECD countries - may see women outnumber men two-to-one in HE (Vincent-Lancrin 2008: 266; see also HEPI 2016; Richmond 2009). Women make up the majority of students across all degree levels except postgraduate research students (ECU 2015b).

Aside from lower rates of participation, men who begin undergraduate courses in the UK are less likely to complete them (ECU 2012, 2015b; HEA 2014)). Moreover, those who do graduate are also less likely to attain an 'Upper Degree' – i.e. a First or Upper Second class degree - with approximately 65% of men doing so against 70% of women (ECU 2014; HEA 2014). Although there is variation in these overall trends across different disciplines (HEA 2014), it is evident in the majority of them, including some traditionally associated with men and skill sets traditionally associated with masculinity, such as Computer Science and Mathematics and Statistics (ECU 2015b; HEA 2014).

Graduate men are as likely as graduate women to report having secured paid, full-time employment six months after completing their first degree, but they are more likely to report being unemployed at this point (ECU 2015b; HEPI 2009). It remains the case, however, and despite the gendered patterning of educational attainment at this level, that men who do secure employment are marginally (by approximately 2%) more likely to secure graduate-level, professional full-time work (2010 ECU 2015b;

HESA), or professional level work (ECU 2014), than graduate women. Men are also more likely to secure an above-average salary (HEPI 2009; HESA 2015). Within the UK, it is estimated that the gender pay gap between men and women is approximately 20% overall, that motherhood is a key moment that can further widen the gap, and that it will take 70 years to eradicate the differences at the current rate of movement towards equal pay (EHRC 2015); for graduates specifically, evidence suggests that the gender pay gap becomes wider over time (EHRC/Metcalf 2009).

The ‘problem’ of the current gender balance within the UK student body

Higher education is accepted as conferring benefits on the recipient beyond those associated directly with degree-level learning (BIS 2013; HEPI 2009; Vincent-Lancrin 2008: 290), including enhanced employability, earning potential, and improved long-term health, well-being, and sense of citizenship (BIS 2013; Bynner *et al.* 2003). Consequently, the rationale for focusing on any disadvantage that may be experienced in relation to HE is widely accepted. Opinion is divided, however, as to whether the recent growth in female numbers in HE comprises any risk to men, who are now in the minority, or renders them a disadvantaged group in this context.

The majority of the research exploring gender inequalities in HE that has emerged in the last five decades has focused exclusively on documenting women’s under-representation and subsequent disadvantage. It has documented their historical exclusion from universities, their subsequent minority status and marginalisation, and their experience of both explicit and implicit discrimination practices (Dyhouse 2006; Hall & Sandler 1982; Moss-Racusin *et al.* 2012; Mullen 2011; Rendel 1975).

Contexts in which individuals perceive that they have minority status are widely recognised to be negative and stressful, and lead to minority group members

feeling less valued, stigmatised and disadvantaged by comparison with majority group members (Meyer 1995). A range of characteristics associated with minority status, including ethnicity and class, has been shown to be associated with stress and feelings of disadvantage for higher education students specifically (Cokley et al. 2013; Dyhouse 2006; Reay et al. 2009; Redmond 2006; Saldaina 1994). Rendel (1975) characterised women's historical minority status in HE in precisely this way, and as consequently having considerable deleterious experiential and psychological impacts.

It has been suggested that women students' disadvantaged status persisted in the academy even once they experienced quantitative parity with men; the gender regime remained a climatically 'chilly' (Hall & Sandler 1982) one for women, because qualitative elements of HE culture continued to produce a uncomfortable learning environment (Aleman 1997; Mann 2001; Spurling 1990). Findings from the post-early-1990s period, when the proportion of women students began to outstrip the proportion of men, have suggested that they still have had to negotiate their learning and achievement in the context of negative stereotypes and lowered expectations from faculty about their abilities (Bradley 1993; Mann 2001; Moss-Racusin *et al.* 2012; Rodd & Bartholomew 2006). Such claims echo those from research pertaining to the pre-1990s period within HE (Bradley 1984; Dyhouse 2002), as well as wider research findings that have pointed to the asymmetrical relationship men and women have historically enjoyed in relation to minority/majority status in the occupational sphere; women can experience significant disadvantage when in the quantitative minority (Kanter 1977; Woodfield 2000), whereas men can experience advantage when similarly positioned as minority members of professions (Woodfield 2007). Currently, for instance, men constitute a minority in the teaching profession within English schools, but nevertheless are significantly over-represented at the Head teacher level

(DE 2014; Future Leaders Trust 2015). Indeed, following on from such findings, research has suggested that women's pattern of elevated attainment in HE is partly a result of their increased levels of course commitment, which in turn is a function of their collective awareness that they require good qualifications to compete in what they anticipate to be the 'patriarchal workplace' beyond the academy, along with its concomitant gender and promotion gaps (Smith 2004: 176; see also Gammie *et al.* 2003).

In this context, emerging suggestions that attention should now centre on men's HE participation, experience and performance have proved controversial. Those who have spoken in favour of such a shift in focus have predicted significant social consequences for boys, men and society if women's recent quantitative domination of HE persists, and have warned that 'inequalities to the detriment of men have emerged in almost all countries' (Vincent-Lancrin 2008: 266), and against the 'dangers of letting this kind of increasing gender differential' continue unchecked (HEPI 2010: 16; see also HEPI 2016). Although it has been acknowledged that 'it is possible that these averages conceal trends less favourable to women within the system' (Vincent-Lancrin 2008: 266), the thrust of this commentary has been that the current gender patterning of HE is likely to produce disadvantage for men comparable to that experienced by women in the past. Academic discussion of the 'men as minority in HE' phenomenon has dovetailed with journalistic discussion about perceived risks to men and masculinity of women dominating the academy, with some commentators referring to a 'feminised' HE (Pirie 2001), and to HE as a 'pink ghetto' (Millar 2008). The potential disadvantages imagined here range from the emergence of adverse stereotypes of men operating within HE, the general feminisation of HE which, it has been argued, has seen teaching and assessment modes become more amenable to women than men,

through to the social and employment consequences of disproportionate numbers of women graduates (HEPI 2009: section 101; Pirie 2001; Vincent-Lancrin 2008: 288). This side of the debate sees calls for HE policy-makers and university managers to begin to recognise men as a minority category, alongside other minority categories, within HE, and consider making reasonable adjustments to address issues raised by this status. For example, in August 2014, the Chief Executive of UCAS, Mary Curnock Cook, called for more attention, evidence and discussion of the underachievement of men in HE, and has recently suggested that the project of addressing other inequalities within HE will not be successful if the current quantitative minority status of men, especially young men, is not simultaneously addressed as this constitutes ‘perhaps the single largest inequality in the system’ (HEPI 2016: 2).

This framing of the changing HE gender balance as one that is necessarily problematic or disadvantageous for men has been challenged. Jacob has questioned whether there is an *a priori* problem, ‘if this finding represents different employment preferences or tastes for schooling, it may not be a matter for great societal concern’ (2002: 589). It has been suggested that the focus on men’s minority status within HE is part of a ‘moral panic’ about masculinity and education more generally (NUS 2012). Indeed, those actively opposing a refocusing around men, claim that such a shift would simply reflect, and further fuel, ongoing moral panic about women’s positive educational successes, and detract from persistent disadvantage for female students within HE itself, and in the wider occupational sphere, as well as in relation to the ongoing masculine domination of the academy in terms of the over-representation of men in academic and senior posts (Leathwood and Read 2009; Morley 2010; NUS 2012).

The speed, scale and possible implications of the changes in relation to the

gendered landscape of HE clearly make it a social phenomenon meriting further attention. To date, however, there has been minimal empirical exploration of some of the key issues underpinning the debate, namely, whether men, as compared to women, recognise their minority status, and have begun to experience HE as a minority gender, and more specifically, whether they feel disadvantaged by their minority status. There is evidence from the UK and elsewhere that men hold less positive expectations of what HE can deliver for them than do women (Vincent-Lancrin 2008: 284-286; see also HEA 2011; HEPI 2016). It has been suggested that some groups of working class men in particular have felt that HE is configured in a specifically classed and gendered way that they experience as culturally exclusive and disengaging.

For decades, research has indicated that the process whereby these young men turn away from HE starts within the compulsory education system and in part in relation to its 'hidden curriculum', i.e. the tacit norms and values schools embrace and communicate to students independently of the formal curriculum. It has been claimed that this hidden curriculum has supported the production of a particular kind of 'culturally-specific ... class-specific' version of academic masculinity, which continues into university and which working-class young men simply do not identify with (Archer et al. 2001, 2005; Cleary et al. 2007; Connell 1989: 298; Willis 1977). This form of masculinity is associated with a type of 'desiccated', abstract, rational mode of thinking that middle-class boys of educationally successful, professional parents can more readily engage with. In this context, many working class boys' masculine identity projects are more comfortably aligned to early entry to the paid work sphere (Archer et al. 2001, 2005; Cleary et al. 2007; Connell 1989).

Moreover, there is evidence that those men who do access HE are more likely to

be disengaged from their courses, have lower rates of attendance, are less proactive in their relationships with tutors, access academic and support services less often, and report greater levels of socialising as a factor associated with such disengagement (ECU 2011; Gammie *et al.* 2003; HEA 2011; Valliant & Scanlan 1996). We do not know, however, if these identified lower levels of engagement can be partially accounted for by a growing sense of disadvantage felt by men in the context of their minority status, and women's higher attainment levels.

This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion about the gendered landscape of UK higher education by exploring whether men, as compared to women, feel themselves to be in a minority on their HE course, and, if so, whether they feel themselves to be disadvantaged by this status. It explores these issues via examination of quantitative and qualitative data provided by 333 men and women undergraduate students in a University in England.

The study

Participants and procedure

One thousand students studying for degrees in departments of Economics, Mathematics, History and Sociology were sent an email asking them to participate in the survey. They were required to consent to their data being used in an anonymised form before proceeding, and had the option of entry into a prize draw for one of three £50 prizes if they provided an email address (held separately from their data).

Equal numbers of men and women students were emailed in the four departments; 333 responded representing 33%ⁱ of those emailed. Of these, 144 (43%) were men and 189 (57%) women. The overall sample had a gender imbalance, therefore, but

one that approximately mirrored the imbalance within the participating institution, and within the UK undergraduate population as a whole.

The target departments were selected because they had a skew towards one gender. In Economics and Mathematics, men were over-represented; men accounted for 65% of students in Economics and 58% in Maths. In Sociology and History, women were over-represented; they accounted for 69% of students in Sociology and 57% in History.

Otherwise, 87% of students were aged 21 and under on commencing their degree, and 96% were under 25. Forty-three per cent came from Year 1, 33% from year 2 and 23% from year 3. Economics and Maths contributed 42% of the sample, while Sociology and History contributed 58%.

The survey comprised 14 questions, four of which collected the background data summarised above. The remaining 10 questions were designed to elicit data relating to students' perceptions and feelings in relation to the gender balance on their course, whether they experienced feelings of disadvantage in relation to it, as well as their beliefs about the likely outcome for both men and women students regarding their degrees and future employment. Participants were also asked about their feelings regarding the gender balance in society and whether they felt disadvantaged in relation to this. For 8 out of these 10 substantive questions, participants were given closed-ended answers to select from, four of which provided scaled responses and five of which required categorical responses for participants to select from. Responses were explored within SPSS v.20, with an initial examination of frequencies, followed by an examination of differences between men and women within responses to the scaled response items (Q1-4) utilising independent samples t-tests, and of differences between men and women utilising Chi-Square tests for independence for the

categorical response items (Q5 to 8). These tests were first undertaken on the whole sample and subsequently on students from disciplines where men were over-represented in the participating institution (Economics and Maths) and students from disciplines where women were over-represented in the participating institution (Sociology and History). It should be noted in relation to students' membership of these areas with different gender distributions, that some of their teaching sessions would be with students from other departments, and therefore, possibly with a more balanced gender representation within their cohort for these teaching sessions.

For the remaining two questions, participants were also asked to respond in an open-ended way to prompts relating to success scenarios, loosely based on Horner's early instrument (1972: 161). In the first scenario the protagonist was a male student, 'John', and in the second a female student, 'Anne'. In each scenario participants were given identical information e.g. they were told that the student had just been informed that they had achieved the highest mark in their year, and were invited to respond to the following prompts:

1. How do you imagine s/he will be feeling?
2. What do you imagine s/he will be doing the night s/he finds out?
3. What is the most likely thing that will happen to this student after s/he leaves university?

A total of 18,016 words were contributed in response to both scenarios; again, fortuitously, men contributed a proportionate 43% of these, while women contributed the remaining 57%.

The analysis of the open-ended, qualitative responses was undertaken by hand and on the whole sample, with the focus on identifying gender differences in the commentary, and, where relevant, disciplinary differences. A coding frame was created following an initial close reading and the comprehensive identification of recurring themes; this was subsequently used to code all comment. Recurring themes were analysed in terms of the frequency of their appearance and the manner and development of their narration, including reference to the gender-linked context of HE and society more generally.

Findings

Quantitative results

Table 1 approximately here - Results of scaled items relating to students' feelings in relation to the gender balance on their course and in society more generally

Independent-samples t-tests were undertaken to compare responses on Q1-4 for men and women, both within the whole sample but also within the subsamples of disciplines where men were over-represented and disciplines where women were over-represented.

As can be seen in Table 1, there was no statistically significant difference between men and women in the whole sample in terms of their feelings of being in a minority or majority gender on their course (Q1). Somewhat unsurprisingly, however, in terms of the subsample of disciplines where men were over-represented, women ($M = 3.77, SD = .92$) were significantly more likely than men ($M = 2.11, SD = .90; t(139) = 10.73, p < .001$) to report feeling that there belonged to the minority gender on their course. Conversely, within the subsample where women were over-represented, men ($M = 3.67, SD = 1.04$) were significantly more likely than women ($M = 2.02, SD = 1.03; t(190) = -10.42, p < .001$) to report feeling in the minority. These differences between men and women in terms of reported feelings of being in the minority did not, however, translate into differences in reported feelings of comfort/discomfort in relation to the gender balance on students' courses, not within the whole sample (Q2), nor within the two subsamples. There were no significant differences between men and women in terms of reported feelings of advantage/disadvantage in the context of the gender balance on their courses (Q3)

within the whole sample, and within the subsample where men were over-represented, but such a difference did emerge in relation to the subsample of students from the disciplines where women were over-represented. Of particular interest here was that women ($M = 3.02$, $SD = .38$) reported greater feelings of being disadvantaged by the gender balance on their course than men ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .42$; $t(190) = 2.35$, $p = .02$)

There were significant differences between men and women in terms of their feelings of advantage/disadvantage in terms of the gender balance in society (Q4). For the whole sample, men ($M = 2.68$, $SD = .70$) were significantly more likely to report feeling advantaged, and women more likely to report feeling disadvantaged ($M = 3.41$, $SD = .80$; $t(331) = 8.71$, $p < .001$). This pattern also obtained within both of the subsamples. Where men were over-represented, men ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .61$) were significantly more likely to report feeling advantaged, and women more likely to report feeling disadvantaged ($M = 3.13$, $SD = .85$; $t(139) = 3.18$, $p = .00$), and, similarly, for the subsample of disciplines where women were over-represented, men ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .79$) were significantly more likely to report feeling advantaged, and women more likely to report feeling disadvantaged ($M = 3.55$, $SD = .75$; $t(190) = -8.14$, $p < .001$).

Table 2 approximately here - Result of categorical items: Students' beliefs about future success and likelihood of experiencing discrimination

In relation to students' beliefs about whether men, women or both would achieve more Upper Degrees at the end of their course, Chi-square tests revealed no significant association between gender and anticipation of degree success within the

whole sample, nor in either the subsample where men were over-represented, nor that where women were over-represented.

In relation to students' beliefs about who would secure better jobs after graduating, the Chi-square test indicated a significant association between gender and beliefs in terms of the whole sample ($X^2 (2, N=333) = 10.31, p = .01$); women were more likely to believe that men would secure the best jobs on graduation, and men were more likely to believe that there would be no difference between men and women in terms of job success. The same pattern of beliefs was found to be significant in the subsample of disciplines where women students dominated ($X^2 (2, N = 192) = 8.02, p = .02$), although no significant association between gender and beliefs about future job success was identified in the sub-sample where men were over-represented.

Chi-square analyses indicated that there were no significant associations between gender and students' feelings of being subject to discrimination on their course, not within the whole sample, nor the subsample of disciplines where men were over-represented, nor the subsample of disciplines where women were over-represented.

In relation to students' feelings of being subject to discrimination within society, the Chi-square test indicated a significant association between gender and such feelings: women reported feeling subject to discrimination more often than men within the whole sample ($X^2 (1, N = 333) = 66.70, p = <.001$) and across the subsample of disciplines where men were over-represented ($X^2 (1, N = 141) = 19.30, p = <.001$) and those where women were over-represented ($X^2 (1, N = 192) = 38.23, p = <.001$).

Success Scenarios

Although commentary from both men and women participants on the success scenarios was proportionate to their representation within the whole sample, both groups provided more commentary, and code-able items within it, in relation to the scenarios where the top-ranked student was the same gender as themselves.

Table 3 approximately here - How respondents imagined Anne/John to be feeling about their success – by gender of respondent and top-ranked student

As can be seen in Table 3, the most common responses to Prompt 1 were the same for men and women participants: ‘happy’, ‘proud’ and ‘rewarded for hard work’. Gender differences emerged, however, in the patterning of these responses. Overall, there was a tendency for higher percentages of participants from each group to ascribe such feelings to the top-ranked student of their own gender. Although both men and women were most likely to describe the top-ranking student as ‘happy’, men used this descriptor more often for both John and Anne. Women were more likely than men to describe Anne and John as feeling ‘proud’ of their achievement, and as being ‘rewarded for hard work’. Moreover, they were over twice as likely to associate such feelings with Anne than men were about John; 51% of women ascribed feelings of pride in achievement and reward for hard work to Anne as against 24% of men who ascribed these feelings to John.

Other feelings were ascribed to John and Anne but by much smaller (< 5%) groups of participants. Broadly similar percentages of men and women described John and Anne as 'excited', 'ambitious' and 'embarrassed' about their degree success. Both groups were more likely to describe the top-ranked student of their own gender as 'relieved', however. Three percent of men and women imagined John as feeling 'superior' following his imagined success, while this suggestion was not made in Anne's case, and both groups were more likely to assess John as feeling confident. No men used the descriptor 'surprised' – or similar - when describing either Anne or John, while 2% of women used it in relation to how they thought John might be feeling and 4% in relation to how they imagined Anne would be feeling.

The gender-distribution within the student body in general or on specific courses received no mention in men's commentary, nor did any imagined gender-linked advantage or disadvantage accruing to either Anne or John in the HE environment. Men did not describe either John or Anne having feelings about their success that was contextualised by their gender, whereas 10% of women did reference the gendered context of the success scenarios. Two per cent of women contextualised John's success with reference to his gender and 8% contextualised Anne's success with reference to her gender, so that women participants who ascribed feelings of 'pride', being 'rewarded for hard work', and 'surprise' to Anne, were more likely to mention her feeling these emotions partly because she had succeeded *as a woman*. Note, for instance, the differences between the responses to the same prompt from the same woman participant below:

[*John would be*]: feeling very proud, maybe that he worked hard for it and deserved the mark he got.

[*Anne would be*]: feeling very proud, same as John, that she worked hard and deserved it. I imagine a girl may be more surprised...that she did so well...women seem to doubt their capability more than men. (Woman, Sociology/History)

Women were as likely to do this regardless of their disciplinary background:

...feeling proud, especially as my subject is seen as a subject that males do better in. (Woman, Economics/Mathematics)

...it is more of an achievement...having beaten all the male members of the class so she will be even happier. (Woman, Sociology/History)

The gendered context of John's success was only mentioned by a handful of women, and here it was imagined as diminished by the fact his degree was taken in a gender-atypical subject:

Happy, maybe thinking it was a "girls" class, so easier. (Woman, Sociology/History)

No participants imagined John's success as affected by an awareness that he achieved it in the context in which more women than men attain Upper degrees.

Table 4 approximately here - How respondents imagined: how they would spend their night after discovering their success by gender of respondent and top-ranked student

Gender differences also emerged in relation to how John and Anne were imagined to spend the night of their success – see Table 4. A larger percentage of men imagined that celebrations would involve alcohol for both John and Anne and both men and women participants imagined that John’s celebrations would be more likely to include alcohol. Both men and women were more likely to suggest Anne would celebrate with friends. More men thought John would celebrate with family or food than Anne, while the converse was true for women participants. It was far more common for men to imagine that John and Anne would stay in on their own and not celebrate; their commentary made an explicit link between high-achieving students and a lack of social life and/or desire to become intoxicated:

It is unlikely he will get drunk if he has worked that hard. (Man, Economics/Mathematics)

... those that are better academically don't tend to have the same social life as others. (Man, Economics/Mathematics)

Table 5 approximately here - *How respondents imagined: ‘the most likely thing to happen to Anne/John after university’ by gender of respondent and top-ranked student*

As can be seen from Table 5, both men and women most frequently imagined the post-degree events in the lives of both Anne and John to be work-related. The most common outcome imagined by both groups, and for both John and Anne, was the securing of good or graduate-level employment, although overall it was more frequently imagined for John, and men imagined it for John most frequently. The second most popular outcome imagined for John and Anne was entry into a protracted or difficult job search, with men and women equally likely to say this of their same-gender student, but less likely to say it of the opposite gender. The largest gap was evident in women's commentary, with female participants less than half as likely to say John would have difficulties finding work than Anne.

Women participants thought Anne more likely to secure unspecified employment than John, while men imagined that both John and Anne were equally likely to do so. Both groups imagined that their own-gender top-ranked student was more likely to begin postgraduate study, with John, as imagined by women, the least likely to be imagined as doing so. Smaller percentages (< 10%) of men and women commented on the salary John and Anne could hope to secure. John, as imagined by men, was the most likely to be associated with a good salary, while Anne, as imagined by women, was the least likely to be associated with a good salary. Finally, both men and women were more likely to imagine John as generally successful in life, and to suggest John would secure work in a named profession, e.g. 'banking', although he was also described by a small group of men and women as destined for unemployment.

Anne was far more likely to be explicitly described as facing gender-linked disadvantage after her degree (8% of men and 18% of women mentioned this), while only 1% of men and women participants thought John would experience gender-

linked disadvantage. Commentary positioned Anne as disadvantaged by the prejudice of employers:

Anne may find it harder to get a job after university as females often are less sought after due to managers and bosses feeling that they will be more inclined to take days off etc. (Woman, Sociology/History)

... The next week she will go to a job interview at some large corporation but will get told that the position was just that minute filled by John. She will feel humiliated and frustrated. (Man, Sociology/History)

Commentary from women here was more likely to refer to the gender pay gap or the glass ceiling:

She'll get a good job, but for less pay than John. (Woman, Economics/Mathematics)

She may join a prestigious organisation but not reach the top positions. (Woman, Economics/Mathematics)

Women were also more likely to imagine Anne as getting married or having children after university, events that were linked for some to her greater vulnerability to employment disadvantage:

She should ... get an interesting job...however this may be slightly harder for she may be perceived as being of "childbearing age" and disadvantaged.

(Woman, Sociology/History)

While a smaller proportion of men's commentary also linked Anne's future disadvantage to occupational inequalities, by contrast with women's, it was more likely to describe scenarios that suggested that Anne's orientation to work was comparatively weaker than men's:

Anne ... may feel nervous about getting a job because she has never worked before... [*she is*] a little naive about the 'real world'...She'll probably be emotional that...friends ... are going to go their own way...she will find a job in a cafe or shop...her degree has no relevance. ... She'll either find a boyfriend and have children or will devote her life to finding a career and becoming a businesswoman. (Man, Sociology/History)

Anne ...[*would*] ...depending on her relationship status either focus on a career path then family or start a family...spend first year or two looking for a job and if she does get one...may leave, choose whether to come back or look after the children. (Man, Economics/Mathematics)

Discussion and conclusions

Overall, the majority of men and women in this sample reported experiencing the HE environment in a similar way, as a context in which they felt no disadvantage or discrimination on the basis of their gender. It is important to note, however, that

where elements of the HE environment were identified as 'chilly' (Hall & Sandler 1982), it was women and not men who were more likely to make such an identification.

Despite clearly identifying when they were in the minority on their course, crucially, the majority of students of either gender reported no feelings of discomfort in the context of the gender balance on their courses; indeed only 5% of participants reported any such feelings, implying that the assessment of minority status was a mainly quantitative exercise for most participants rather than one which might involved negative feelings that can be associated with such a status. It was similarly striking that there were no significant differences between men and women in terms of feelings of disadvantage, or being discriminated against, on their course, with one exception: women reported greater feelings of disadvantage in terms of the gender balance on their course within the subsample of Sociology/History, disciplines where women were over-represented. This finding may be related to the curriculum content within these disciplines, and the potential link between such content and the development of an enhanced awareness of equalities issues and to social and historical evidence for women's past and current disadvantages (Kanter 1977; Woodfield 2000). Such awareness, however, if it did exist, did not extend to producing greater feelings of being discriminated against on their courses for women participants. The salient point here is that participating male students reported no feelings of minority stress, or negative feelings of discomfort and marginalisation that have previously been identified as associated with belonging to a minority student group (Cokley et al. 2013; Meyer 1995; Reay 2003; Reay et al. 2009; Redmond 2006; Rendel 1975). This held true even when they identified as a minority member of their course.

The quantitative findings did not reveal participants to hold more pessimistic views about the chances of future success for male students as compared to female students. In terms of degree performance, this was partly predicated on the mistaken assumption (HEA 2014; ECU 2015b) made by male and female participants that men and women students were equally likely to attain an Upper Degree. Moreover, while there were significant differences between male and female participants in terms of how the future employment prospects of graduating men and women were perceived, because many male participants believed that there would be no differences between graduating men and women in terms of employment success, whereas many female participants believed men would secure better jobs. There was, therefore, some alignment between the beliefs of both male and female participants and the occupational realities that graduates experience in the UK today (ECU 2015b; HEPI 2009; HESA 2015; EHRC 2015). Again, however, the salient point here is that participating male students did not report themselves as anticipating future disadvantage in relation to their post-course achievements, and that where any disadvantage was anticipated by participants, it was by women and focused on disadvantages that might accrue to women.

These findings were linked to the participants' perceived inequalities within society more generally. Here, female participants were more likely to report feelings of disadvantage in relation to the gender balance in society, as well as feelings of being subject to discrimination within society.

This overall pattern of findings was mirrored within the qualitative data collected in relation to the success scenario prompts. It was particularly notable that men did not explicitly mention the gender-distribution of their course, nor any gender-linked disadvantage accruing to John (nor Anne) within the HE environment; when

such a context was mentioned, it was only discussed by women and more often focused on women being positioned subordinately to men. In terms of their futures, John and Anne were almost equally predicted to secure 'good' or graduate-level employment. As we have seen, John was more likely to be predicted to undergo a difficult job search and to be unemployed, he was also more likely to be described as securing a specific profession that he had been working towards and to be generally successful in life. Allied to this, women were far more likely to be described as facing gender-linked disadvantage in their futures generally, and specifically in relation to work. Such recurring themes are perhaps all the more notable in the context of participants' predominant belief that men and women would achieve the same rate of Upper Degrees.

Where women were positioned in the qualitative commentary as being less likely to secure future occupational success than men, the framing of these contributions was also of interest because, while male participants were more likely to position women as having a weaker commitment to paid work, female participants' commentary made reference to anticipated unequal treatment within the occupational sphere. This latter commentary was far more likely to specifically mention workplace discrimination and the impact of relationships, marriage and motherhood, rather than to women's personal preferences.

There were further interesting differences in the ideation of successful students in the qualitative data, especially in relation to the fact that both male and female participants depicted John as more likely than Anne to celebrate their degree success with alcohol, and the fact that men's commentary was more likely to associate the imagined academic success of either Anne or John as related to a lack of social life and to an excessive degree of self-discipline or study-engagement. Such

findings may indicate that patterns of stereotyping of disengaged male students, and conscientious female students, exist within the student body (HEPI 2009). They provide little support, however, for the possibility that that men's reportedly higher levels of socialising, and lower levels of study-oriented behaviour (Valliant & Scanlan 1996; HEA 2011) can be related to a sense of gender-linked disadvantage on their part, consequent upon their minority status within HE. They are more consistent with research claiming that women's study-oriented behaviour may be related to their anxieties about social status in society in general and in the future workforce in particular (Smith 2004).

Taken as a whole, these findings suggests that caution is required when considering predictions that a sense of male disadvantage might follow from the current gender balance in HE (HEPI 2009, 2016; Vincent-Lancrin 2008). Furthermore, given the reality of a pattern of persistent occupational advantages for men, including graduate men, we should be cautious when drawing conclusions about future male disadvantage emerging from their minority status within HE.

It is not suggested here that the seeming lack of awareness within the student body of any possible disadvantages accruing to men within HE, means that they do not experience any disadvantages. Nor is it suggested that men – either individually or as a group or subgroup – might not require specific gender-linked needs to be supported within HE. Further socio-demographic information relating to the background of participating students was not collected as part of this project and the case for more fine-grained research into this area would seem to be self-evident. It is clear that such research might fruitfully explore the extent to which intersecting characteristics, such as ethnicity and socio-economic class, impact on the feelings of disadvantage and of minority/majority status for both men and women in HE. It

would be particularly interesting to explore the specific experiences and feelings of working class, male students in relation to their perception of minority/majority status, given that much previous research has pointed to their greater likelihood of a lack of identification and engagement with the cultures and practices of tertiary education as it is currently configured (Archer et al. 2001, 2005; Cleary et al. 2007; Connell 1989: 298; HEPI 2009, 2016; Willis 1977).

Notwithstanding the necessity of developing more nuanced understandings of the sub-groups denoted by the term 'men' in this context, the findings here point to an important conclusion about how we understand the general position of men within HE, and suggest that we should proceed with caution when developing our analytical frameworks for understanding related educational gender gaps, and how men and women are experiencing them. What seems clear is that a strategy of deploying discourses and frameworks that have evolved to understand the past experiences of other minorities within HE – women, working class students, mature students, BME students (Cokley et al. 2013; Dyhouse 2006; Hall & Sandler 1982; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012; Mullen 2011; Reay 2003; Reay et al. 2009; Redmond 2006) – to understand the current male situation and experience, is unlikely to be fruitful. The history of male dominance within HE, as well as the persisting male dominance of the sector's upper echelons, and of much of the wider occupational sphere, means that the quantitative dominance of women within the student body does not equal their qualitative dominion within the academy; to imply it does constitutes a category error. While highlighting an important social phenomenon, many of the predictions relating to those seeking a refocusing of concern and analysis on to men within HE (HEPI 2009; Pirie 2001; Vincent-Lancrin 2008), appear to be in danger of making such an error. They have too often been devoid of a sufficiently nuanced understanding of the

past and persisting asymmetries residing in gender relations (Connell 1987; NUS 2012). More specifically, this perspective neglects the possibility that a generally more powerful status group can be outnumbered in a specific institutional location, while retaining qualitative dominion within that locale as a result of its wider authority and advantage. Those identifying men as potentially *disadvantaged* by women's majority status in HE fail, therefore, to take due cognisance of a fact that is acknowledged here by both male and female students - that participation and performance in HE needs to be understood in the context of the wider gender regime in which women still face the greater disadvantage.

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ⁱ Percentages in this article are rounded up if they are above the 0.5 mark, and down if below.