GENDER LENSING IN PRACTICE: A WEBPAGE ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Webpages form a crucial interface between an organisation and the public and is often the first point-of-contact. For higher educational institutions such as universities, it forms an important portal to attract students and employees. From their overarching mission statements, to policy presentations, webpages can provide information regarding the basic milieu of a university. Therefore, it can be assumed that the language used in creating websites would reflect institutional attitudes on issues such as gender equity, diversity and inclusion.

In this paper, we carry out a gender and diversity focused explanatory analysis on webpage content of 43 universities in Australia. The objective of this study is to identify the degree of gender/diversity friendly language used by universities, in presenting gender and diversity focused policy and procedures via webpages. The three-click rule was applied in deriving the relevant web content.

Based on a general word analysis of the content, and existing gender and diversity literature, a 2-tiered word hierarchy was designed for further analysis. The thought underlying the two-tiered design is to differentiate between the more superficial language, related to gender equity and diversity policies (the upper tier) and the more functional language around individuals and their families (the lower tier). For example, university websites may present superficial information on the equity and diversity policies present, but may fail to present more intricate details regarding child-care, parental leave etc. The two-tiered word structure is designed to capture such differences.

The upper tier consists of two clusters: words related to equity/diversity/inclusion (Equity word cluster) and words related to culture/sexuality and indigenous identity (CSI word cluster). The lower tier consists of one cluster encompassing words related to individual employees, partners, families and carers (Carer word cluster). Stage one of the analysis consisted of carrying out a comprehensive descriptive study of the Group of Eight (Go8) and Australian Technology Network (ATN) universities with regards to the weighted percentage of words for the three identified word clusters. Frequencies and weighted percentages for the word clusters were contrasted by groups (i.e. Go8 and ATN) and other explanatory variables (overall gender ratios, gender ratios by career grade/duties etc).

Preliminary results suggest some differences in the language used around gender equity and diversity policies, both at the individual university level and groups. Reported means(±SD) of the weighted percentage for the Equity word cluster is 1.91(±1.06) for Go8 universities and 3.49(±4.19) for ATN while the reported means(±SD) of the weighted percentage for the CSI word cluster is 0.58 (±0.57) for Go8 and 0.57 (±0.51) for ATN. The reported means for the Carer word cluster is 2.77(±1.70) for Go8 and 2.16(±0.83) for ATN. Even with a low sample size (5), the relatively low standard deviation for the weighted percentage of the Carer related word cluster for ATN is noticeable. Differences in the mean weighted percentages for the 3 clusters based on the gender ratios was also observed. The second stage of the analysis extends this preliminary analysis to all 43 universities to identify various patterns that may exist between the gendered web language and institutional characteristics.

Keywords: Gender lensing, gender equity, diversity, inclusion, policy, web content analysis, Australian universities, Go8, ATN.