Abstract

Gendering the 'Millennials'. Analyzing responses to new student profiles in Spanish ICT Higher Education

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Our contribution will present results from a two year research effort (2008-2010) to map the situation of women in ICT related higher education in Spain. The project undertook a comparative study of the underrepresentation of women among academic staff and students across six Telecommunications Engineering- and Computer Science Faculties in Spain. Although theory aims at establishing certain general frameworks for understanding the continued underrepresentation of women in ICT related professional fields, this presentation argues for a more “locally” grounded approach to examining the obstacles and success factors which promote or hinder an improvement of the position of women in this field.

Scrutinizing the position of women students and staff in ICT higher education implies taking into account several recent changes: the legal requirement to provide an equality plan, the pedagogical and curricular changes tied to the implementation of the Bologna process, the need for academic staff to respond to changing excellence criteria, and above all the need for the universities to deal with a new profile of incoming students. Our argument revolves around the issue how ICT departments respond and deal with the recent necessity of dealing with a new generation of incoming students that sharply contrast with previous cohorts. A supposed decline in work values, lower academic performance, and personal immaturity of students threatens to question established notions of “good” engineers, together with their “solid”, “functional” knowledge and skills. The emerging responses collected in semi-structured interviews with department academic staff across the whole career ladder provide the opportunity to examine gender at work: how very gendered notions in relation to the education of future engineers (their curriculum and pedagogy), their future tasks, skills, and work values actually reinscribe the masculine nature of these ICT careers and professions. As will become apparent, the potential to rethink ICT engineering in the light of a new and more demanding student clientel largely draws upon very traditional and conservative notions of engineering education.

The question and issues that emerge from our research concern the difficulty of harnessing these existing “real” problems of university staff (declining enrolment rates,
lower academic profiles, deteriorating image of the career) and short-circuit them with a more explicit gender agenda. Among other things, the relative absence of gender concerns within the daily business of the departments is due to the fact that the recent implementation of equality plans has installed a sense of equality achieved. In addition, although there are only few women students, those who study in engineering departments usually outperform their male fellow students and are far from being perceived as “problematic” in any way. At the same time, it is not just that girls stay away from engineering but dropping enrolment rates in general “erase” specific concerns about female students. Together with a lack of awareness of the gendered nature of science and the reduction of gender to “women's work-live balance issues”, the scope for introducing gender more broadly into departmental activities is almost non-existent. This poses all the more forcefully the question as to how existing “real” concerns can be tied to struggles for a more de-gendered engineering education. The question is to which degree the reaction to the changing student profiles are able to trigger a rethinking of engineering education along the lines of gender concerns. Only if these locally pressing concerns serve as the point of departure for a gender equality agenda, will they have a chance of success.