Mini Track on The Power of Power: The Gender Wars and Academic Freedom of Speech

Mini Track Chair: Madeleine Davies, University of Reading, UK

The track aims to explore the fall-out from ‘The Gender Wars’ which erupted in US, UK and Australian institutions in 2016 and, in particular, to reflect on its implications in relation to the interpretation of academic freedom of speech within the HE sector.

In the UK, the impact of potential changes to The Gender Recognition Act has caused concern for feminist scholars who often identify as ‘Gender Critical’. These academics have struggled to preserve spaces in which to voice their concerns in a climate increasingly characterized by hostility and division. There is the potential for both Gender Critical feminists and Trans Activists to feel embattled and to feel that the other’s right to academic freedom of speech trespasses on ‘hate speech’. Universities have often struggled to negotiate a pathway through a heated debate informed by a perceived clash between rights.

This panel asks how universities can protect academic freedom of speech when both sides of the argument views the other’s speech as inherently hateful. The track does not aim to rehearse Gender Critical Feminist viewpoints nor the positions proposed by trans ideology; instead, it aims to explore what the clash reveals about shifting power dynamics between students’/customers’ and universities, the role of social media in public intellectual debate and in institutional dynamics, and the potentially far-reaching challenges to core assumptions regarding academic freedom of speech.

Suggested topics include but are not limited to:

- the shift in power between students and institutions/academics revealed in the struggle for speaking rights
- the role of institutions in defending academic freedom of speech and what is at stake in this concept
- analysis of the role of social media in the creation of a febrile debate; implications in terms of institutional authority
- the divisions the debate caused within the academic community (predominantly in the US, UK, and Australia)
- the long-term implications of the ‘war’, and the lessons to be drawn from it
- how the concept of ‘academic freedom of speech’ may need to be reshaped

Dr Madeleine Davies is an Associate Professor of Women’s Writing in the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading. She has published on the work of Margaret Atwood, Daphne du Maurier, 1960s television drama, modern drama, and technology enhanced teaching. She has won a variety of teaching and learning awards and is known for innovative projects with students. She is currently researching relationships between Orwell’s use of critical dystopia and Atwood’s use of ‘speculative fiction’ and she has just finalised a new publication project with students, A Room of Our Own: The Virginia Woolf Learning Journals (UoR 2020).

Submission details
In the first instance a 300 word abstract is required, to be received by 11th September 2019. Please read the guidelines at http://www.academic-conferences.org/policies/abstract-guidelines-for-papers/ Submissions must be made using the online submission form at: https://www.academic-conferences.org/conferences/icgr/icgr-abstract-submission/

If you have any questions about this track please email the mini track chair: m.k.davies@reading.ac.uk

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