The Rhetoric of PDP in Higher Education: A Gender-Neutral Discourse?

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Abstract

Personal development Planning (PDP) has become a central feature for students in higher education and is linked to employability. This has come about as the result of an awareness that in a globalized education and workplace market, students need to be more competitive in developing and marketing their academic and other skills. However, this inner-directed process has spawned a discourse of voluntarism that dissolves engagement with political issues such as the gender implications of programmes of study and associated careers. This paper argues that a gender-neutral focus on the 'person' can potentially lead to the maintenance of inequalities for career pathways for men and women. This conceptualization is compared with that of work-life balance which, in effect, is taken as applying more to women than men, but which is formulated within gender-neutral discourse.

Keywords: personal development planning, gender, higher education

Introduction

This paper considers the ideological effects of recent discourse concerning personal development planning (PDP) in higher education (HE). Whilst on the face of it this discourse may seem personally liberating, with the aim of engaging students and developing them as independent learners and career planners, there are a number of problematic issues that follow from this inward focus on personal reflection. The root of this is the inherent voluntarism in such a focus and the concomitant dissolving of wider political matters that impact upon the individual into an intrapsychic world. Whilst PDP may appear gender-neutral, it is argued that this is a discursive veneer that covers over the problematic nature of gendered notions such as the 'independent learner', 'graduate attributes' and a gender-divided labour market.

The discourse of PDP is now entrenched in policy initiatives at national and trans-national level in higher education. There is an increasing emphasis on encouraging students to engage in PDP, both in an academic and vocational sense. This is taken as developing independence in students so that they can become more autonomous learners and career planners (Wilson-Medhurst, 2005a; Wilson-Medhurst, 2005b). Meanwhile in the world of work there has been a raft of 'family-friendly' policy initiatives that encourage people to attain a degree of work-life balance (WLB). The intention here is to afford employees the opportunity to achieve a degree of balance between their personal and professional lives, especially given the increasing emphasis on flexible working patterns (Kelloway, Gottlieb and Barham, 1999; Gershuny, 2000). This is now all the more relevant in a post COVID-19 environment in which flexible working is likely to become much more common.

It is also possible to trace an increasing trend towards decision-making as being located 'down' at the individualized sphere of personal choice. This perspective has most notably been advocated by Ulrich Beck in terms of a transition in the nature and experience of risk

and representing a "categorical shift" with respect to the individual and society (Beck: 127). In this risk society 'old' collective forms of identity have replaced by 'new' identifications that are rooted in individual actions. Beck traces this shift back to the 1970s and argues that the Fordist era of production and wealth distribution, in which economic and political interests were bound up with the desired ends of full employment and high standards of welfare and healthcare, ran into problems. Beck reasons that negative outcomes such as rise of mass unemployment, industrial pollution and nuclear hazards effectively created a schism in the institutional structures associated with Fordism and ushered in era preoccupied with the problem of insecurity and risk. In the risk society perspective, citizens are now individually accountable for themselves and their economic opportunities. Thus, Beck notes that the traditional place of family ties and class has given way to secondary agencies and institutions which 'stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashions, social policy, economic cycles and markets' (Beck, 1992: 131).

This paper therefore addresses these discourses in terms of the tensions that arise when educational and career matters are viewed as being related to individual reflection and choice. Whilst Beck's notion of the 'individualized individual' seems to fit this discourse, it nevertheless glosses over the way in which this focus loses sight of the gendered nature of much of this policy and practice in HE. The first section considers the developments in PDP in higher education and how this has led to a concern with a masculinist and instrumental approach to learning to the exclusion of other aspects which impact upon the student experience. The second section considers the parallel discourse of WLB and the way in which a gender-neutral terminology leaves matters up to individuals and obscures the issue of how this is addressed and targeted more towards women than men in the workplace. The argument advanced here is that this individualizing discourse dissolves away any sense of the gendered backdrop to these discourses.

PDP in higher education

The basic principles of PDP are action-orientated and cyclical (Clegg & Bradley, 2006) and include the following dimensions: (i) goal setting and action planning; (ii) doing (learning through the experience of doing with greater awareness); (iii) recording (thoughts, ideas, experiences, evidence of learning); (iv) reviewing (reflections on what has happened, making sense of it all), and (v) evaluating (making judgements about self and own work and determining what needs to be done to develop, improve, and move on). However, whilst these principles are readily accepted, their translation into curricular developments and relationship with subject provision is less clear. This is a significant issue as the first ever mapping and synthesis review of PDP processes found that most, "adopted a prescriptive approach to PDP implementation in order to achieve course-specific outcomes" (Gough et al., 2003: 2). The danger with such prescriptive approaches is that PDP may come to be seen as an imposition rather than something that is integral to the higher education experience. Moreover, it can be viewed as an end in itself rather than as a means to a genuine engagement with the provisional nature of knowledge.

Therefore, if the process of PDP is to become an integral part of the student learning experience, a number of fundamental constructs need to be accepted by academic staff and students. It is crucial that these processes are integral to the whole learning experience of a student in higher education and thus should be embedded firmly with the rest of the curricula and student experience, and not seen as a separate activity or concept. The process also needs to be underpinned by institutional strategies, especially for teaching, learning and assessment and student support and needs to be learner-centred, in terms of supporting of a wide-range of

different learning styles and motivations. The main outcome from such processes in terms of personal development will likely be a significant contribution to students becoming independent, autonomous, self-aware learners. In other words, staff and students should be able to engage actively with the PDP process rather than experiencing it as an imposition.

However, whilst such an approach can be enabling for students in their learning there are tensions that emerge with such a focus on the individual student. These are often political issues concerned with matters such as (i) national, institutional or departmental PDP policies; (ii) access to PDP records; and (iii) academic or vocationally driven. These are issues which can become dissolved in the instantiation of PDP in terms of the overall focus on the individual and the need to get such a policy translated into action, and especially via the increasing reliance on virtual learning environments. The nature of any virtual learning environment defines the nature of the learning process via provision of tools and templates for actions. All too often the learning process can be subtly moulded as an instrumental rather than a critical process. Learning in this context can become a process of managing information (including personal information) rather than discovery, insight and growth (Brabazon, 2007). Thus, as some have suggested this has enabled a managerial model of learning to be surreptitiously substituted for the dialogic and critical model which characterizes the ideal of learning in higher education (Lambier & Ramaekers, 2006).

Others have pointed towards the tensions that arise in the different uses to which PDP is put. Three "ideal types" encapsulating the attitudes of different subject or discipline areas, have been distilled. The first ideal type, the professional, is strongly governed by the requirements stipulated by professional and statutory bodies such as health care professional bodies. The second, employment, includes both a general orientation to graduate employment and a specific work placement during study. This model is associated with areas such as management and business, sport and leisure, and those areas of applied science and engineering where the course focus is primarily towards employment rather than discipline. The final model, academic, is focused on the academic development of the student, incorporating meta-cognitive skills and those of the specific subject discipline. Humanities and social sciences predominate in the academic. The model also included some areas of pure science where the emphasis was more on subject understanding (Clegg & Bradley, 2006).

The aforementioned tensions in PDP were drawn out an articulated in interviews conducted with staff and students in the social sciences in one recent study (Moir et al., 2008; Moir 2009). One major aspect of this is the extent to which PDP is dealt with on an institutional-wide basis and its relevance for social science. In effect this is an issue of generality versus specificity. However, there is also more to this that bears closer inspection in terms of the way that PDP can, at a broad level appear to be related to the issue of enhancing employability, which some staff do not see as their subject in the sense that it is not an academic matter as such. On the other hand, there are members of staff who have suggested that PDP is something that could be used to encourage independent learning and reflexivity which they see as a key academic skill for social science students. A key issue that cuts across the above practical concerns is that of ensuring that the 'personal' nature of the process stays with the student whilst ensuring engagement in order to bring about the stated aims of PDP. On the one hand, it is something that is within the individual student's control, but on the other hand its needs to be accessible to allow staff to assess its impact.

However, it is also clear that whilst PDP is almost universally accepted in principle, its more avowedly vocational association with graduate attributes and employability has gained

considerable traction in recent years. Perhaps this is not to be entirely unexpected given that PDP must function as a public institutional quality enhancement measure related to politico-economic matters, and as something that is private and personal to the student and within her control. The concept of 'graduate employability' itself has been the subject of debate in terms of its operationalization (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011). Yorke & Knight (2007: 158) defined it as 'a graduate's suitability for appropriate employment'. Dacre-Pool & Sewell (2007) point to a range of different aspects of the concept, including: subject knowledge, generic skills, emotional intelligence, career development learning, reflection and evaluation, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy. These aspects align with those of PDP in terms of a focus on the self as a project to be worked upon. More recently, Barton, Bates and O'Donovan (2019) have demonstrated how volunteering among psychology students is related to employability and enhanced self-confidence.

There clearly an ideological focus on ensuring graduates are ready for the employment market, although this discourse has been the subject of critique. For example, Fotiadou (2020) used the methodology of corpus-based critical discourse analysis in the analysis of 2.6 million words deriving from 58 university websites, and more specifically the careers services. Her analysis highlights the ways in language used by careers services reproduces and promotes a neoliberal ideology in which the notion of employability is related to fierce competition in the graduate job market. More rarely has the academic side of PDP been considered and problematized as equally ideological. Take for example, the rhetoric of independent learning that underlies much of PDP. One the face of it, 'independence' is seen as being crucial to the not only such matters a lifelong learning, but also a defining feature of what it is to be a graduate. It is therefore, almost without question, accepted as being both valuable both for the individual and for society. However, whilst this rhetoric may appear emancipatory it is nevertheless ideological in the sense that it is firmly rooted in the noted of self-reliance and the utilization of rational goal-driven thinking. This kind of thinking is traditionally associated with a masculine approach to such matters, and therefore whilst normatively presented as being desirable, is problematic for women. This has been highlighted in a recent qualitative study of students at a post-1992 university in the U.K. in which the dominant constructions of the independent learner in which asking for help is associated with what may regarded as technical matters of study rather than other forms of emotional support. In effect, a masculinized 'techno-managerial' agenda dominates such 'help' as a means to developing independence thereby promoting a rationalist model of learning Leathwood (2006).

While there is a positive connotation with the notion of personal development, this is not simply about a neutral inner process. However, the dominant discourse is one of a concern with the notion of individual self-direction and planning related to politico-economic aims such as employability and improving the nature of graduates as future employees in terms of national competitiveness in the face of a globalized knowledge-driven economy. This has gained much more of a hold in the light of what is commonly referred to as the 'Bologna process' which was instituted following the Bologna declaration of 1999 which aims to create a European-wide higher educational area by 2025. A number of structural changes have taken place in European universities that not only regulate the practice of studying but also include changes in the goals of higher education to meet the demands of the knowledge economy. The adoption of personal development planning and progress files are very much part of this process. These developments have also intensified following the European Union Lisbon Treaty of 2007 and European Commission Lisbon Agenda for addressing the globalized knowledge economy. Aspects of this agenda are aimed at improving graduates' employability and competitiveness. Graduates are required to be adaptable, multi-skilled and flexible, and

able to take charge of and plan their own careers in a rapidly changing workplace. The engine of this is PDP with an accompanying discourse of 'graduate attributes' (Barnett, 2006). There has also been a greater emphasis placed on developing the 'purposeful graduate' (Clydesdale, 2015). Universities now stress that their degree programmes include career development learning and personal development planning (Watts, 2006). PDP relies heavily on the notion of self-regulated learning (SRL), "monitoring and managing of one's cognitive processes as well as the awareness of and control over one's emotions, motivations, behaviour, and environment as related to learning" (Nilson, 2013, p. 5). The necessitates setting goals, planning, self-directing, focusing, and maintaining motivation. (Nilson, 2013).

Whilst this discourse aims to empower students by equipping them with 'key skills' to be adaptable and flexible, it also normalizes the view that coping with the labour market demands is an individual responsibility rooted in planning and decision-making. This trend has not been without critics who have drawn upon the Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality' to highlight the neoliberal focus on how individuals adapt to 'the market' as a means of social control (Fejes, 2007; Bloch, 2008). Still others have highlighted the depoliticized nature of what they view as the recent uptake by newer universities, in particular, of graduate attributes (via a focus on employability) as a way of legitimating what they offer whilst 'traditional' universities still largely adopt a disciplinary approach to their legitimation (Leathwood & Read, 2009). It is argued that this focus on the personal in this context reinforces the hegemonic dominance of vocationalism and downplays any sense of the gendered nature of associated attributes.

The specification of these attributes and their mapping onto curricular outcomes is now well underway in U.K. HE and in Scotland with its emphasis on an enhancement-led approach. A number of HEI websites now make explicit reference to these attributes, and as noted above, the newer post-1992 universities have embraced these as a means of legitimating their vocational credentials. However, of particular interest for this paper is the gendered nature of these graduate attribute statements which are commonly framed around masculinized characteristics such as competitiveness and the desire to succeed, assertiveness through driving change, and a rationalized notion of handling knowledge in terms of complexity. Some make reference to the ability to work in teams, but this is generally framed around the notion of 'communication skills' from individualistic perspective. Much of this discourse of graduate attributes is linked to a culture of audit that requires these to be evidenced in ways that relate to HE and governmental policy documents. Thus, it is not uncommon for universities to now adopt strategic planning models that explicitly link such policy initiatives to pedagogic targets that make explicit how, where and when these attributes are developed or attained. The current economic recession has intensified this process as universities strive to sell the vocational worth of their programmes in terms of marketable skills that graduates can expect to exit with that will make them more employable.

Whatever perspective is taken on the merits or problems of PDP, there are underlying ideological tension between the notion of individual academic development and the concomitant contribution to an educated citizenry, and the imperative that requires knowledge linked to economic wealth creation. However, in an era of mass higher education it is often the latter that is a priority for governments. This political dimension to PDP can be lost when located inside the practical matters associated with education as an inner-directed process. Once set within this discourse then the practicalities of such matters curricular design, delivery and assessment come into play. However, this is a carefully managed process in which 'personal development' is circumscribed in a such a manner as to be related to

masculinized attributes. Learning the process of PDP therefore becomes the end in an instrumentally-driven fashion and its gendered nature is occluded within the rhetoric of employability.

Work-life balance as gender neutral discourse

This kind of focus on decision-making in terms of personal development can also be found in the emergence of a discourse concerning 'work-life balance' and 'individual choice' rhetoric in today's workplace (Perrons et al., 2009). The use of gender-neutral language in the WLB rhetoric of today's world of work can lead to the impression that gender stereotypes are no longer a constraining factor, especially for women. This again seems to accord with Beck's notion of the 'individualized individual' who must chart their life course by weighing up matters and making decisions and choices. Parents are seen to be exercising choice when they take up the flexible work options on offer in order to balance their family and work commitments in accordance with their needs. In this way flexibility is extended beyond the attributes of the person and into the management of their family life.

Embedded within this discourse of balancing work and family commitments, and the employment policies and practices predicated upon this, is the view that as far as is reasonable, employers and employees should work together to try and ensure that family commitments are not sacrificed at the expense of work. The complexity of balancing work and family demands has been recently examined in terms of understanding the demands of both settings, the resources of both settings, the specific abilities of the individual parent or partner, and the fit between these aspects (Voydanoff, 2005). For example, many occupations may require additional hours at unexpected times in order to complete a project by a set deadline. This is a demand, but it may also provide an additional resource in terms of personal prestige and career advancement. However, determining the actual benefit of this may require additional cost in terms of decreased time with a partner or children. The concept of boundary spanning has been used to explain this in terms of the impact that meeting the demands of one setting has on the other setting. Thus, determining what makes for balance between work and family requires assessing the settings, resources, and demands separately, and then assessing the trade-offs individuals make between them, and the impact this has on the whole family.

As in virtually all occupations, women as the child-bearers carry the major responsibility of child care arrangements (as well as the care of ageing parents), and unless 'family-friendly' policies are part of the work environment, women employees are less likely to have a long-term and sustainable career and may have to take career breaks. Returning to work after such a break becomes an increasingly difficult task given that the time away may lead to unfamiliarity with new technologies and work procedures. Furthermore, pregnancy and childbearing have particular negative consequences for women in the early part of their careers, given that achievement and promotion during these years coincides with fertility.

Hence the turn to current approaches that call upon the need for more recognition of the diversity of flexible working styles and WLB needs, rather than policies which specifically enable working mothers to manage paid work and family needs. The aim is try and move beyond simply viewing equal opportunities policies as being a matter of human resources, and one primarily directed at women, to being concerned about all employees and an issue of concern for all employers and organizations (Sinclair, 2000; Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000). This discourse of diversity is meant to be open to all and is based upon the view that it is a matter of individual circumstances and choices. However, this approach to diversity management whilst focusing on the individual has a blind spot when it comes to the issue of power

differentials or structural inequalities (Sinclair, 2000). The argument that we are all individuals and are all have different circumstances effectively ensures that the pervasive male models of work are left unchallenged in the background. In doing so, a focus on diversity can absolve political and organizational responsibilities for tackling equal treatment and equal opportunity for women at work (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999).

In one of the earliest applications of this approach a study of equal opportunities talk, similarly found a mix of 'principle versus practice' discursive constructions with regard to gender and employment opportunities (Wetherell, Stiven, & Potter, 1987 Supporting equal opportunities in principle, positioned the speaker as liberal and fair-minded whilst talking about (external) practical employment issues (e.g. maternity cover, childcare, emotional unsuitability to stressful working environments) served to undermine this without any personal negative attribution to the speaker. In other words, participants in the study could at one and the same time appeal to identifying in principle with equal opportunities in an abstract sense whilst citing practical affairs as somehow inevitably at odds with this in how things are in the 'real world' of day-to-day living. In more recent work in this vein, sameness and difference discourses have been identified as being used by bank managers when alluding working mothers whilst the work context was portrayed as gender neutral (Meriläinen, 2000). It has also been shown how an abstract principle of individualism is favoured in professional men's accounts on discrimination and equality (Riley, 2002).

Other discourse analytic work has shown how gender-blind approach to talk about such issues through terms such as 'flexibility', 'flexible working' and 'work–life balance' were used to occlude inequality for women (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). The exclusion of talk about men or fathers in managers' accounts, and the construction of a 'generic she' or 'generic female parent' implicitly assumes that the mother, and not the father, is responsible for childcare (Stokoe & Smithson, 2001). Participants' interview accounts routinely followed a 'gender-neutral' trajectory, by moving from an opening response to such questions in terms of gender making no difference, to talking about gender problems in a careful and implicit manner, and then by concluding that gender is not issue. This three-part discursive sandwich embeds any talk of gender as problem within an overall gender-neutral account as follows: (a) suggest gender is not an issue; (b) describe a gender problem or inequality; (c) conclude that gender is not an issue. However, such accounts are problematic given that they dilute any sense of gender as a political issue because they fall back on a 'generic she' as the subject of equal opportunity. In effect they minimize any notion of gendered work practices and fail to tackle the male model of work. The net effect of this is to therefore reproduction of gender differences within a rhetoric of working in a non-gendered organisation.

The distinction between male model of work as the norm and any deviation from this as problematic is why many women still feel compelled to fit in with this prevailing view as the acceptable nature of how employment is structured. The use of gender-neutral terms inevitably leads to falling back on the individual as the source of freely made decisions about working hours, parenting and childcare. So long as both women and men construct these 'decisions' and 'choices' as primarily a matter for women then a gender-neutral language of work-life balance may do little more than preserve the status quo of male patterns of work.

There are also generational and socio-economic class issues that are bound up with the discourses that women draw upon when discussing the relationship between work and family commitments. Data from in-depth interviews undertaken as part of a generational study of Australian women and found that the 'progress narrative' is no longer a major discourse for

young women, but rather gender equity is taken for granted. Motherhood continues to define and shape their working arrangements, but the discourses they use to make sense of the work-life balance tensions are framed in terms of 'choice', not 'equity'. The roles of 'mother' and 'worker' are not talked about by younger women as separate, but rather inter-twined. Gender still shapes young women's working lives, but in more complex ways than previously, and is related to the expansion of lifestyle options as well as class factors.

The young women interviewed place the constraints that affect achieving work-life balance in terms of the limited resources they have available to them as self-directed individual women. Gender equity discourses were therefore not used by the young women interviewed to understand the pressures and constraints that confront them, given that they presented themselves as facing individual choices in their lives. This discourse of individualism was also apparent in how they talked about perceived obstacles that they face as individual agents, who also happen to be women. As such choices are presented as depending on the availability and of resources and access to them. They did not identify with a particular social class but rather talked about life choices as being the result of their own individual achievements or failings. This discourse of WLB as being a matter of individual choice does not stem from notions of equity as a driving force for policies in this area but rather is about meeting the demands of different expectations and preferences for the ways in which people organize their lives according to different access to resources (Everingham, Stevenson, & Warner-Smith, 2007).

Previous research has highlighted the complexity of how people can at one and the same time support family-friendly polices as well as undermine such support through talking about local practical concerns. These discursive constructions therefore constitute a barrier to the promotion of WLB issues. The current rollout of WLB initiatives across the European Community does little to tackle the engrained ideology of this being more of a concern for women rather than men. The male model is left in place and whilst the issue of attaining a favourable WLB is constructed as a problematic issue where policy initiatives need to be directed.

In a climate when it is regarded as 'politically correct' to espouse a positive endorsement of work-life balance initiatives and policies then this does not pose a problem for men who can show support for such a position safe in the knowledge that it does not impact on them to nearly the same extent as women. It is also the case that engrained views on women as being responsible for childcare restricts their geographical mobility unlike men and, as in many fields of employment, mobility is often an advantage in terms of gaining experience and promotion. The net effect of this is that it leads to women working lower down the career ladder with men pursuing their careers at higher levels and in senior positions. This maintains a role model of top professional workers as male, again maintaining such work as a normatively male pursuit whilst women are predominately in junior or support roles given their work-life balance 'needs'.

The rhetoric of WLB is often equated with that of personal choices and decisions. This creates a dichotomy between personal life and career and the notion that this tension requires some resolution. The solution to this is offered in terms of a discourse of individual personal choice and decision-making. Thus, individuals can weigh up matters up about attaining a WLB through adjusting their personal lives or the occupational role aspects of their identity. However, this again ignores the extent to which an occupational role is contractual and normatively presented as a given whilst personal life is not subject to the same legal-rational

authority (Weber, 1978). In other words, there is less scope to change an occupational role than there is to change personal circumstances. A rhetoric of individualism ensures that the gendering of childbearing and care are cloaked within a language of personal choice, as if such matters were equally distributed amongst men and women when patently they are not. As previously noted, this kind of gender-blind rhetoric may at first seem liberal and reasonable but can in fact serve to work against women.

The final point to make revolves around the 'sameness-difference' opposition. Given that occupational roles are in themselves gender-neutral then the assumption is made that all who undertake an occupation can do so in the knowledge that it is performance in the occupation itself that matters. It is the demands of the job itself that are taken as requiring that those who undertake this work to be treated as being the same, irrespective of gender. To argue for gender difference and its impact on occupational performance would be to go against the task requirements of work. However, people can switch between the 'same-difference' ends of the explanatory dualism when it comes to talking about equal opportunities in employment and the position of women (Nentwich, 2006).

What is evident from the above is the parallel ideology that can be drawn with PDP. As with PDP, the discourse of WLB involving individual reflection and decision-making is something that is, almost without question, accepted as a proper and entirely appropriate basis for people's actions. However, this danger of the reduction of such matters down to this individual level is that it actively occludes the ideological basis of this discourse and the practices that hold in place an overall masculinist approach to how the personal is related to education and the workplace. Whilst social theorists such as Beck have contributed to our awareness of individualization as a key feature of reflexive modernity this kind of focus disembeds the individual from society and in so doing diverts attention away from power inequalities (Francis & Skelton, 2008).

Conclusion

The emergence of a discourse of personal development related to education and the workplace has intensified in recent years. On the face of it, this may at first appear as a welcome development. The fast-paced and evolving nature of the knowledge economy has led many to argue for a more flexible workforce capable of keeping pace by planning and managing their own learning, developing themselves, and managing their own career. Mass higher education has also come to be regarded as an essential means of meeting the demands of the knowledge economy and students are urged to engage in PDP in order to make themselves more adaptable and marketable through this process. In tandem with this has been a concern to manage the demands of work and family life, and again this has been placed in the hands of the individual. Therefore, a rhetoric of the individual as being much more in control of their own destiny has taken root.

However, this paper has argued that this largely illusory, and that the exclusive psychologization of these matters has ideological effects. A neoliberal discourse which stresses individual control, planning and choice is often justified in terms of a paradoxical discourse of a global knowledge economy that requires and structures the need for a greater focus on the flexibility of individuals. However, it is not the case that individuals can simply develop themselves through exercising freedom of choice but rather that an internationalized and globalized knowledge economy demands that people are ever-increasingly more adaptable within a world of increasing market-like structures. As we look outward to the global impact of this world upon our lives, so we are encouraged to look inward as a means of

generating our capacity to change to meet these demands. This is likely to become more prevalent in a post-COVID-19 world.

The effect of this focus on the individual is to dissolve away a focus on the ideological nature of this concern with self-direction. As people are encouraged to look inward and adopt a more rationalist and instrumental approach to their lives, so their view outwards is occluded in terms the focus on the personal as having political implications. It is then but a short step for people to view problems and seek solutions as being their own responsibility rather than requiring an examination of the very foundations of this discourse in terms of a masculinist approach which is problematic, not only for women, but also relates to other social and economic factors, as well as being restrictive for men.

The ideological import of this conclusion is that people have at their disposal a set of discursive resources available to them in terms of the 'knowledge economy', 'flexibility' and 'risk' that legitimate an overriding focus on the personal. Mass higher education coupled with a de-regulation of the workplace to enhance productivity has naturalized the discourses of PDP and WLB. Beck's 'individualized individual', far from being empowered by this discourse, is the subject of a reinforcement of traditional gender lines of demarcation, and in particular the dominance of a masculinized conceptions of learning in HE as related to PDP and graduate attributes, as well as feminized notion of WLB.

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