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# The Politics of Motherhood in the Neoliberal University

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### Project description:

This project explored the experiences of mother-subjects (staff and students) of the supports and barriers to their participation and inclusion in Higher Education. The intention of this project is to form the basis for practice, policy and cultural change within the local context, and to visibilise, systematise and analyse some of the barriers to participation and inclusion of mother-subjects in HE. It makes concrete suggestions and develops resources that can contribute to overcoming some of these barriers in theory and practice.

### Conceptual and/or methodological framework:

This project developed a combined methodology of auto-ethnography and participatory action research focused on UON as a case study. Developing a UON Mother Research Collective was a strategy for becoming academic and mother-subjects differently within the neoliberalising university space. We created different conditions of academic and care labour by working together across difference and attempting to forge collectivity, focusing on questions of (in)equity at the intersections of motherhood and academia. As part of our further work together we organised a participatory workshop with mother-subjects at UON, undertook 15 in-depth life story interviews with mother-students and staff, and organised two-day Politics of Motherhood in the Neoliberal University workshop on the 31st of March and 1st of April 2016. Emerging from these encounters are a number of papers (including at least one from the research collective) which we are putting together for a special issue about Motherhood and Academe to be published in 2017. We are initially approaching Gender and Education with a view to this as the ideal publication outlet. We are also developing a methodology and pedagogy tool-kit to support culture and deep-level institutional change-processes and change-agents.

### Key findings:

Mother-subjects bring multiple knowledges and skills to HE which can contribute to the development of the gender equity agenda at UoN and beyond, and also to more general questions of pedagogy and epistemology in and outside of the classroom. However, a lack of acknowledgement of these leads to mother-subjects facing multiple cultural, institutional and everyday barriers to equitable inclusion and participation in HE. These include a culture which excludes and devalues the private sphere of caring-labour and the differential experiences and situations that mother-subjects must navigate to successfully appear as academic-subjects; the reduction of these contexts and situations to personal

questions which de-links them from the discursive structures through which they are created and reproduced; and a culture of academic labour in which we are always on call and infinitely flexible which creates demands and a pace of academic work that are often at odds with the demands and temporalities of mothering and caring-labour. As a result:

1. The culture(s) of academia are gendered in ways that tend to exclude subjects who care, and practices of care which create barriers for equitable inclusion of mother-subjects in HE;
2. Tensions exist between the linear output-focused temporality and logics of the excellence agenda and the non-linear process-orientated temporality and logics of navigating motherhood and academia and ensuring diversity at practice, policy and governance levels; and
3. The epistemological absence of the knowledges and wisdoms of mother-subjects means that any contributions that could be made to the equity agenda and the research and teaching pedagogies and methodologies of the University are lost.

### Implications for the future:

As such, there are tensions between the excellence agenda and the equity agenda that require policy and institutional review, reform and change. The following questions have been provoked by this research, and as such constitute areas for future exploration:

1. What has been put into place in other educational-institutional spaces (such as universities) to ensure equitable inclusion of mother/parent subjects?
2. What differences exist between faculties, schools and disciplines in terms of the barriers and opportunities for mother-subjects and how do we bring consistency to equity-creating practices, cultures and processes across higher education?
3. How might a strategy and strategic alliance be developed across higher education so as to begin to implement the pedagogical work required to facilitate the kinds of policy and practice changes needed, as indicated from the findings of our project?