

# Middle managers' negotiations on equalities – old and new understandings in the changing university

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – National and international developments, along with increasing demands for equality, challenge the promotion of equality in academia. This study aims to investigate how Finnish university middle managers recognize, conceptualize and address equalities as actionable within their roles.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study draws on qualitative content analysis of interviews with middle managers ( $n = 10$ ) from three multidisciplinary, research-intensive universities at different stages of organizational change. The university is conceptualized as a hybrid organization where many “new” managerial and equality work developments are both supported by and in tension with “old” practices and structures. The terms “old” and “new” refer to legal and managerial developments in universities, as well as to shifting understandings of equality.

**Findings** – Three key tensions regarding equality work reflect the state of change between “old” and “new”: equality as dismantling gender segregation vs. meritocracy, equality as routines vs. emancipation and equality as formal participation vs. inclusion. The analysis uncovers how “old” equality work upholds inequality and “new” does not really challenge it. Promoting equalities in the “new” university entails both addressing new discourses and conceptualizations and acknowledging the persistence of intersecting inequalities. Embracing polyphony as a feature of university participation – and treating it as a necessary condition for organizing – can advance equality and democracy.

**Originality/value** – Although the management role is emphasized in managerialized universities with diverse demands for equality, little attention has been paid to middle managers as implementers of equality change. Their perspectives are critical for understanding equalities and participation in academia.

**Keywords** Equality, Managerialism, Middle managers, Non-discrimination, University

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

Higher education institutions are expected to promote equality, be inclusive and diverse, and provide equal study and work opportunities for students and staff. Moreover, the increase in practice and activism approaches in higher education (HE) studies on inequalities continues to raise more issues (Deem *et al.*, 2022). Equality issues are currently addressed in increasingly managerialist contexts. This means in practice that the power of the university's management in relation to the academic community has been strengthened and that economic thinking and competitiveness are emphasized (e.g. Carvalho and Videira, 2019; Shepherd, 2018). New

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managerialism clearly differs from traditional university management, where power is based on academic consensus and collegial decision-making by the university community, the main driving force being the pursuit of knowledge (Kolsaker, 2008). Changes in academia shape academic work in complex ways that also affect equalities (see, e.g. Ollilainen, 2019).

Diversifying demands for equality alongside national and international developments and changes in academia pose challenges in promoting equality. The equality and non-discrimination work of universities is linked to national policies, legislation and international commitments. Research has described shifts in (gender) equality policy, which are related to managerial university: e.g. moving from state to market feminism (Kantola and Squires, 2012) and governance feminism (Halley *et al.*, 2018). Mixed effects on equality include both the implementation of corporate values but also increased transparency (Mackay, 2021).

The intensified organization and concentration of power among university managers positions middle managers as key intermediaries in advancing equality. They are expected to translate strategic imperatives into practice. Their understandings, conceptualizations, and preferred modes of engagement significantly shape the prospects for equality-related initiatives—including policies and plans—within universities. As such, they represent a central focus of this research. We conceptualize the managerialist university and the pursuit of equality as a contradictory field, one that requires middle managers to act as change agents navigating a hybridized discursive landscape (Crevani *et al.*, 2015) of the “old” and “new” university. In our analysis, we integrate existing evidence on changes in HE and developments in shifting approaches to equality into a novel conceptual framework centred on the two concepts “old” versus “new”.

The article proceeds as follows: First, we present the context of this study, equality work in a managerialist university setting with Finnish Academia as a case in point. Finland as a Nordic country is internationally known for having high-level gender equality. The Nordic welfare state model relates to the issue of gender equality, and the Nordic states have both promoted and benefitted from gender equality. After presenting our framework, we outline our research methodology, followed by an analysis of the findings, which are presented as tensions in equality work. Finally, we discuss whether these tensions hinder or advance equalities in academia and how they reflect the dynamics between the “new” and “old” university. Can middle managers potentially influence positive change?

### Equality work in the managerial university

In recent decades university reforms worldwide have been implemented in the context of neoliberalism and new public management, or new managerialism (Leišytė and Wilkesmann, 2016; Rinne *et al.*, 2014). Managerialism in terms of ideologies is associated with the application and actual use of values (e.g. effectiveness and excellence), techniques and practices (e.g. audits, accountability, performance standards and significant power of managers) derived from the private sector (Deem, 2001, 2020; Shepherd, 2018).

Thus, academic management and the underpinning value systems have exchanged traditional collegial ideals for business-like and market driven principles. Middle managers, as Bryant and Stensaker (2011) note, occupy competing roles during institutional change and must often balance these roles simultaneously. They frequently navigate not only shifting institutional structures but also conflicting demands tied to their responsibilities. In the managerial university, middle managers have assumed expanded duties, including strategic, operational, human resource, academic, and external relationship management (Meek *et al.*, 2010). This growing managerial pressure positions them between the strategic aims of senior leadership and the academic values of the university community (Meek *et al.*, 2010). As a result, middle managers feel sandwiched between the demands of the university and staff (Bryman and Lilley, 2009), even though they would often rather perceive themselves as managers than as subordinates despite having superiors (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2019).

Middle managers may be constrained in their engagement with (gender) equality work due to tensions between institutional equality goals and broader organizational objectives, as well as contradictions embedded in hegemonic discourses such as gender neutrality and meritocracy (Lansu *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). Ideals of efficiency and smooth processes can lead to a decoupling of managerial practices from formal organizational procedures that support equality (Nielsen, 2021) such as linking meritocracy to promoting gender equality (Broström *et al.*, 2024). Nevertheless, fostering change requires problem ownership, understood as both taking responsibility and demonstrating a willingness to promote equality in practice (Lansu *et al.*, 2020, p. 8).

Actionability is central to both equality work and the role of middle managers. Resistance often stems from paradoxes: while equality is widely accepted and easily discussed at a general organizational level (Snickare and Wahl, 2024), such discussions rarely translate into concrete actions at the individual level (Broström *et al.*, 2024). When equality is framed primarily as a matter of individual attitudes or personal development, it becomes easier to sideline systemic demands for change in favour of managerial efficiency (Nielsen, 2021). Consequently, equality initiatives do not address structures, and therefore profound change fails (Snickare and Wahl, 2024).

Equality work is also defined by changing conceptualizations around equality that reflect the changes in the university environment. Over the last fifty years, organization-level HE research has focused on HE institutions' policies or practices to reduce inequality. HE institutions have sought to be more inclusive and diverse in relation to students and staff. Debates around inequality have shifted from affirmative action and equality of opportunity to equity, equality and diversity. Diversity has emerged as a key concept in many studies over recent decades, extending to include gender and sexual diversity (Deem *et al.*, 2022). Such research has highlighted, e.g. how exclusion and invisibility in academia are experienced by gender and sexual minorities (Asquith *et al.*, 2019; Ferfolja *et al.*, 2020). The concept of intersectionality has also proliferated, stressing overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage (Deem *et al.*, 2022). Equality-related conceptualizations are fluid and affected by context, experience, culture and broader social dynamics (Bencivenga and Drew, 2021, p. 181).

Key concepts may also change their meaning over time. The concept of inclusivity was initially used in studies focused on supporting individuals with disabilities or learning difficulties, but more recently it has come to include other socially and culturally disadvantaged or marginalized groups, with a growing emphasis on universal design approaches in HE (Leišytė *et al.*, 2021). While diversity has traditionally been closely linked to businesses (with the accompanying connotations), the concept is defined in varying ways in both European and U.S. discussions (cf. Deem *et al.*, 2022). Diversity is often addressed relative to a category, mostly gender (see, e.g. Timmers *et al.*, 2010). International research on diversity in universities has focused on gender equality, but also on racism and ethnicity, whiteness and White privilege, disabled staff or LGBTQ staff (see, e.g. Bhopal, 2023; Lee, 2023; Leisytė, Deem & Tzanakou, 2021; Rosa and Clavero, 2022).

Equality work and inclusive goals at the managerial university can also be approached as attempts to succeed in competition between universities, for example recruiting competent staff (e.g. Einarsdóttir, 2020; Yarrow and Johnson, 2023). Certifications related to equalities provide opportunities for competing and image management as well as securing financial gain. An example of such an opportunity is the Athena SWAN Charter (ASC) that was introduced in 2005 in the UK by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), later part of Advance HE. It is also used worldwide to support and transform gender equality in HE and may be used as a funding criterion. The ECU's Race Equality Charter (REC) of 2014 was a policy response to racial inequalities. HE members may apply for institutional ASC and REC awards recognizing their gender and minority ethnic equality efforts (see Bhopal, 2023). Yarrow and Johnson (2023) argue that universities peacock for instance, ASC awards for ambitious equality plans, measures and implementation to stand out from other institutions and demonstrate their

(gender) equality credentials for the market and reputational gain. Also, universities applying for Athena SWAN may engage people from marginalized positions and disciplines in the application process but still dismiss their demands for addressing organizational inequalities (Ahmed, 2021). Although equality policies and plans are often assumed to be effective, they frequently suffer from poor coordination, inconsistent implementation, limited support at the departmental level, and a lack of rigorous evaluation (Timmers *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, cultural and institutional differences have made it difficult to transfer models and practices both within and across organizations (Furst-Holloway and Miner, 2019). Indeed, interventions tend to stay disconnected from the everyday practices of academic work (Nielsen, 2021; Kinahan *et al.*, 2021; Bencivenga and Drew, 2021).

In sum, while conceptualizations around equality have widened to more social justice-oriented perspectives, managerialist developments affect how these developments play out. As universities continue to change, equality work remains vulnerable to marginalization. Following the aforementioned discussions, we understand middle managers' work as discursive, translatable and agentive, accomplished not only between top and bottom but also between "old" and "new". "Old" and "new" are understood here as referring to the legal and managerial developments of universities, where new and old university co-exist but also as the traditional ways of understanding equality issues (old), to which has been added the expanding concepts of equality (new). Middle managers incorporate these perspectives into their understandings of equality and inclusion. These understandings are embedded in how university middle managers conceptualize issues and what kind of actionability they deem possible. Universities are seen as affected by changes in both internal and external environments. Equality is approached as a multidimensional issue contextually motivated by both the university and the interview itself and linked to the prospects of realizing democratic processes. Thus, we ask: What tensions can be detected in middle management perspectives on equality in academic work and how do they reflect the stage of change?

### Study context: Finnish universities and equality issues

Structural, ideological and functional changes in Finnish universities are often associated with the change in the Universities Act of 2010. Finland has been keen to adopt global "management fashions" (Kantola and Seeck, 2011). The legislative reform restructured university management and decision-making, placing particular emphasis on strategic leadership. It marked a departure from the long-standing tradition of tripartite democratic representation within the academic community. The reform introduced a more integrated professional dimension alongside the former bureaucratic, academic, collegial and democratic model (Poutanen *et al.*, 2022; Rinne *et al.*, 2014). The centralization of decision-making power at universities has led to a decline in the staff's opportunities for inclusion and promoted de-democratization (Poutanen *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, several universities have merged, and more detailed objectives for the funding for each university have been set (Poutanen *et al.*, 2022; Seuri and Vartiainen, 2018). Universities have moreover become increasingly strategic resources aligned with business interests to support the national economy in the global knowledge economy. The renewal of the Finnish universities and their governance has been slower than in many other countries, but once started, the changes have progressed quickly, and the practices have changed considerably compared to the "old" university (Poutanen *et al.*, 2022).

Due to the recent and rapid transformation of Finnish HE, we refer in this article to the "old" and "new" university. However, we conceptualize the university as a hybrid organization in which many elements of the "new"—such as managerialism and strategic governance—are well-supported by, and coexist with, traditional academic values (Crevani *et al.*, 2015; Pekkola *et al.*, 2021). As a hybrid, the university incorporates contradictory logics originating from both the public and private sectors (Pekkola *et al.*, 2021). As Crevani and colleagues (2015, 147) argue, "leadership cultures are produced in the reforms of HE, in a hybridized discursive

context of traditional academic values and emerging managerialism and leaderism.” Thus, while the “old” and “new” university coexist, their underlying values and operational logics may conflict. Organizational studies have long engaged with such contradictions. The paradox perspective sees these tensions as ongoing and irreconcilable, best approached through acceptance and balance. In contrast, the dialectical perspective views them as conflictual, with transformation occurring through confrontation and resolution (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2016).

Gender equality with its strong legislative support (Equality Act 609/1986) has dominated in equality work at Finnish universities, raising issues of discrimination against women (see, e.g. Husu, 2001). Diverse differences and intersectional approaches have been more recent and strengthened by anti-discrimination legislation (Non-Discrimination Act 1325/2014). Finnish universities are legally mandated to draw up institution-specific gender equality and non-discrimination plans, which guide their equality work. The content and form of gender equality plans are more precisely defined than are non-discrimination plans stemming from legislative differences. Traditionally, equality work has focused on individuals—particularly women—but the emphasis has since shifted to structural and cultural factors (Tanhua, 2020).

Until recently there has been little discussion on racism in Finnish Academia (Rastas, 2020). However, increasing population diversity has prompted greater attention to both racialized minorities and whiteness (Rastas and Poelman, 2021) particularly in relation to career advancement and discrimination (Jousilahti *et al.*, 2022). More attention has been drawn to the colonization of the Sámi in Finland, and the position of indigenous peoples in research initiatives (Kuokkanen, 2022).

Recent research on equality and non-discrimination work in Finnish HE has identified many shortcomings in the planning processes and monitoring (e.g. Jousilahti *et al.*, 2022; Tanhua, 2020). As opposed to Athena SWAN in the UK (see Bhopal and Henderson, 2021), there is no assessment of statutory equality and non-discrimination work in Finnish universities.

Nevertheless, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) conducts some monitoring of equality work in Finnish HE and recommends greater transparency in staff recruitment as well as more systematic procedures to support equality and non-discrimination (FINEEC, 2019). In practice, the assessment of equality remains somewhat technical: FINEEC (2022) primarily evaluates whether statutory equality and non-discrimination plans have been prepared and whether the state of equality is monitored through staff and student surveys.

A somewhat more critical assessment has come through research in Finnish HE with a focus on gender equality and ethnic diversity. Key challenges include inadequate implementation of equality and non-discrimination plans, the relatively low number of women and ethnic minorities at the highest career stages in universities, non-transparent recruitment processes, poorer career development among ethnic minorities, discrimination experienced by these minorities, and a non-inclusive working culture (Jousilahti *et al.*, 2022).

In universities, the most evident statistical indication of gender inequality is the so-called “gender scissors” that continue to clip the academic careers of women at the highest levels. In Finnish universities, only 32.2% of professors are women. However, academic disciplines are also horizontally segregated by gender, as is the Finnish labour market. For instance, the proportion of women at the professorial level varies significantly across fields. Compared to the European Union (EU) average, Finland has considerably fewer women professors in the natural sciences (15.3%) and in engineering and technology (10.1%). In contrast, Finland exceeds the EU average in the share of women professors in agriculture and forestry (40.6%), social sciences (37.7%) and arts and humanities (47.31%) (Jousilahti *et al.*, 2022).

Although equality work in the Finnish universities is strongly motivated by legislative requirements, the monitoring mechanisms and incentives to promote equality remain inadequate. Also, managerialist developments have been seen as a threat to equality work if

reduced to plans and surveys and handled as a separate administrative process (Ikävalko and Brunila, 2011). Still, given their experience with implementing action plans, understanding the role and perceptions of middle managers may prove fruitful (Callerstig, 2016). European-wide developments in strategic governance have led to the strengthening of managerial governance with narrower gender equality policies and managerial ideals infiltrating gender equality measures (Elomäki and Ylöstalo, 2021), which may render suspect the steering interests of the policymakers guiding the universities.

Thus, equality work in the Finnish universities faces multiple demands pertaining to the new ways of organizing academia. Despite extensive research on the complex and paradoxical world of middle management, few studies have taken the role of middle management seriously (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2019). Little is known of middle management's views on equality work (but see Lansu *et al.*, 2020).

## Data and method

### *Participants and interviews*

This study draws on data from the research project *Changing University and Equalities in Academic Work* (Haapakorpi *et al.*, 2023). Here we use interviews with university middle management ( $n = 10$ ). The interview material of the research project has been produced at three multidisciplinary and research-intensive universities in different stages of organizational change. Our case universities were the University of Turku, Tampere University and the University of Eastern Finland, all having undergone structural reforms in the 21st century.

Two faculties and two departments were selected from each university. We chose the faculties and departments to ensure a maximally diverse range of disciplines and that “hard” and “soft” sciences, applied and pure sciences, as well as research-oriented and teaching-intensive disciplines were represented. We interviewed three representatives of middle management from the University of Turku and from the University of Eastern Finland and four from Tampere University. Five interviewees were female and five were male. Their titles were: Dean, Head of Administration, Development Manager and Director. Our interviewees differed in that some had held administrative positions throughout their careers, while others had backgrounds in academic work, teaching and research before assuming an administrative role (Haapakorpi *et al.*, 2023). While all middle managers were formally responsible for promoting equality, their actual engagement varied. Some were more directly involved in equality-related tasks—such as overseeing planning processes—than others. According to their respective equality, diversity and non-discrimination plans (Tampere University, 2023; University of Eastern Finland, 2023; University of Turku, 2021) all the universities reported that they had organized or were planning to organize training on equality issues for managers and supervisors. However, the length and depth of such training as well as the level of participation among middle managers haven't been documented.

The interviews with middle management from each university were conducted on a virtual communication platform (Zoom) and lasted 30–90 min. Two research group members participated in each interview in varying combinations. The interview themes were changes in faculty structure, university strategy, education and research, management and co-operation, university services, personnel policy, recruitment and career advancement, equality and equality work. We invited the interviewees to share their views and experiences in addition to describing the situation of their respective units in relation to the university's leadership in their role.

The interviewees considered the equality work at the meso level (Deem *et al.*, 2022), i.e. it focused on the faculty's equality policy and practices. The depth to which equality issues were addressed, varied across interviews. It might be elicited generally by mentioning the equality plan or equality and its challenges, or then by asking questions about specific personnel groups (such as international staff) or equality dimensions (such as gender or age). The interviewees used varied framings when discussing equality, underscoring the complexity of the concept.

As [Holli \(2012, 77\)](#) illustrates, differing understandings of equality are found both among academic researchers—who work with such concepts professionally—and among citizens who engage with them in everyday contexts. In our research one interest was specifically these understandings of equality among middle management and how they reflect the changes in universities.

Although our interview material is relatively small, it includes a diverse range of middle managers from various disciplines and professional roles. We recognize that the data do not allow for broad generalizations about middle management understandings of equality in academic work, and our findings may be specific to the Finnish HE context. However, the intensification of managerialism is a general trend observable in many contexts. Therefore, we argue that our findings have wider resonance, and they increase the understanding of middle management attitudes and introduce insights that can be further developed in future research.

### Analysis

In this study, we use specifically those parts of the interviews where middle managers discuss equality and equality work in their universities and faculties. Although we focused (in particular) on the theme of equality, the interviews were also read as a whole.

The interviews were approached applying the principles of qualitative content analysis ([Tavory and Timmermans, 2014](#)). After multiple readings of the transcripts, the systematic analysis proceeded in three phases, combining both inductive and deductive approaches. In the first phase, close reading was used to condense and thematize the material (inductive orientation). The second phase employed a thematic and interpretative reading, in which themes were summarized and meanings interpreted using concepts from equality research and managerialism (deductive orientation). In the third phase, the material was examined in relation to organizational change, the notions of the “old” and “new” university, and discursively shaped tensions. Thus, the findings are not a summary of all equality-related views of the middle managers expressed in the interviews. Throughout the analysis, illustrative quotes are provided to show how interviewees framed and understood equality in academia. All quotations have been translated from Finnish into English.

### Findings

When discussing equality, diversity and inclusion, university middle managers brought up several contradictory issues. These are discussed as tensions in equality work between gender segregation and meritocracy, equality routines and emancipation, and, finally, formal participation and inclusion. The last point leads us to consider democratic processes as part of equality work. A summary of our findings is provided in [Table 1](#), which outlines the “old” and “new” aspects of equality work within the tensions identified in middle managers’ perspectives. As the literature has shown, there is often a disjuncture between perceptions and actions. This issue is addressed through the concept of the *actionability of equality work*, which is also included in the table.

As the table indicates, the tensions illustrate an expanding field of academic participation that holds potential for including multiple axes of inequalities and diversity. Yet, equality work is constrained by several aspects inhibiting action. In the subsections that follow, we highlight the specific features of each tension in equality work. All these tensions stand in relation to managerialist developments in the changing universities studied here and reflect the old, the new and the hybrid.

#### *Dismantling gender segregation vs. meritocracy*

Equality work in the university is typically about issues of gender representation. Indeed, the highest academic positions in Finland are male-dominated – almost 70% of university rectors are men while among deans and vice-deans the difference is less marked (see [Härkönen, 2020](#);

**Table 1.** Tensions in middle manager perspectives on equality in academic work between old and new understandings

| Tensions in middle manager perspectives                                         | “Old” equality work                                                                                                                                                                                     | “New” equality work                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Actionability of equality work                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>dismantling gender segregation vs. meritocracy routines vs. emancipation</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• equality as equal representation of women and men</li> <li>• focus on routine issues in knowledge production</li> <li>• persistence of inequalities</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• evolving equality conceptualizations: stressing positive and business-oriented frames</li> <li>• potential for increased visibility of diverse groups</li> <li>• diffuse opportunities to influence</li> <li>• perspective inclusivity confined to equality policy work</li> </ul> | <i>supported by</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• need for active measures recognized</li> <li>• law-based understanding legitimizing equality work</li> </ul> | <i>challenged by</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• implementation lacking</li> <li>• meritocracy as tool for resisting gender quotas</li> <li>• reducing equality work to administrative procedure</li> <li>• limited means to recognize inequalities</li> </ul> |
| <i>formal participation vs. inclusion</i>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• democratic processes through representative participation</li> </ul>                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• polyphony acknowledged</li> <li>• low barriers to communication</li> </ul>                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• polyphony not organized for</li> <li>• dependence on unit size</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Source(s):</b> Authors’ own work                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

Jousilahti *et al.*, 2022). In the middle management perspectives, a tension in equality work arises when demands for equal gender representation are juxtaposed with the ideals of meritocracy. The marked gender segregation of the Finnish labour market also pertains to academic disciplines, both horizontally and vertically, and over the years much attention has been paid to solving this problem in Finnish gender equality policies. Diminishing gender segregation was a common approach to promoting gender equality, also among university middle managers. Although they highlighted gender as an issue, other dimensions were sometimes mentioned:

[T]he overall image of [University X] is still too male-dominated. We have too many middle-aged men with Finnish backgrounds as heads of departments. [...] Diversity is sorely needed. (Manager 8)

As is typical in conventional gender equality work (Pietilä, 2021), the interviewees primarily understood equality as the equal representation of women and men across academic disciplines and positions. Gender imbalance was seen as a source of problems such as constituting an increased risk of gender-based harassment.

Active measures to redress gender segregation were reportedly needed, as managers cited examples of disciplines where women held only token positions and perceived the lack of women as something that required change. A middle manager with extensive experience on working abroad viewed the token-position of women in the discipline as pitiful, linking it to both recruitment and student admissions:

I wish it was otherwise. And it isn't impossible to change. I've been to [country X] and [country Y] and in both in the [field] the portion of women is about 25, 30 percent. [...] Positive discrimination, so to say, was used in [Y], recruitment is stopped if there aren't competent applicants of both genders. [...] In Finland it is very difficult as opposed to for example USA where there's this subjective overall analysis in student admissions. In Finland student admissions are purely based on the score and that's that. It [the gender composition of applicants] is very difficult to influence in any other way than advertizing and such. (Manager 10)

According to this view, gender imbalance remains unresolved due to the lack of appropriate mechanisms in recruitment and student admissions processes, and little appears to remain within the scope of possible actions. In middle management perspectives positive discrimination and gender quotas were either viewed negatively, or managers assumed they were already in use in their organization. Gender equality aims and academic meritocracy seemed to be at odds, particularly when practices and processes affecting the possibilities to gain merit were not problematized:

[...] So the supervisor was very concerned that if there are two equally good applicants, does one always have to choose the one who, or are we always trying to fix gender equality that shouldn't competence be the best possible at a university. (Manager 6)

Although gender quotas have been tested as corrective measures in countries such as Sweden and Norway, their practical application in Finland is still lacking (Pietilä, 2021). The incompatibility of (gender) equality and meritocracy has been addressed through research scrutinizing the relationships of merit as gender-dependent, disadvantaging women students despite equality policies (Powell and Arora-Jonsson, 2022; Broström *et al.*, 2024). Also, the qualifications for selecting professors entail gender practices that undermine women's competencies, and for women candidates the scrutiny is more rigorous than for men to negate any preference for women on grounds of gender (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). In all, relying on meritocracy exacerbates competition in an already insecure environment (Siekkinen *et al.*, 2020). These findings highlight how organizational practices remain non-meritocratic and how both these practices and the myth of meritocracy function together as a mechanism that reproduces inequalities. The appeal of relying on such myths lies in their capacity to support the legitimacy of the organization (Amis *et al.*, 2020). Understanding merit

as dynamic could contribute to tackling gender segregation in academia (Powell and Arora-Jonsson, 2022).

Overall, the issue of gender imbalance was a recurrent feature of managers' reflections on the state of equality. The tension between the recognized need to dismantle gender segregation and the use of meritocracy to resist active measures hinders progress, and so does relying on younger generations to drive the change (see also Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2010). Motivation for equality work differed in terms of the workability of the issues. Equality work is further complicated by the distancing tactics and obscure uses of new equality conceptualizations by the middle managers, which will be discussed next.

This tension reflects adherence to the "old" understanding of equality, which emphasizes reducing gender segregation and promoting equal representation both horizontally and vertically. However, the actionability of this goal remains low: gender quotas go too deep into actual operations. When meritocracy is used as a tool for resistance (see also Broström et al., 2024), the hierarchy between equality and meritocracy becomes evident. In discussions of equality, meritocracy itself is rarely questioned. Practices are not a part of the new and changing university. If equality issues were marginalized and unworkable in the "old" university, nothing has changed in this respect.

#### *Routines vs. emancipation*

Although middle management comments to some extent acknowledged challenges to quantitative gender integration, such as gender-based path-dependencies in academic careers and the culture-related difficulties of gender pioneers, the discourses they engaged in highlighted gender equality routines. Such routines make promoting equality an administrative procedure which relieves the managers of responsibility. The "new" university places increasing emphasis on administrative rules, centralization and harmonization of regulations and procedures (e.g. Crevani et al., 2015). Together with new conceptualizations of equality with divergent content and partially hidden social differences, equality routines and emancipation form a tension that is not easy to manage in equality work.

Adopting new concepts may reflect the possibility to transcend the boundaries of conventional, routinized equality work. For example, a diversity programme for an inclusive university community was presented as an advanced version of a legislation-based equality plan stressing wage statistics and gender distribution:

For the last two years, we have tried to do our programme from a completely different perspective, rather as a more substantive question than as something mechanical which must be done because we are required to do so. (Manager 8)

The conceptualizations used affect the emancipatory potential of equality work. While equality and non-discrimination were often linked to negative issues, this perspective was augmented with concepts stressing positivity, such as diversity, inclusion, integration and participation. Because diversity is mainly related to positive issues, part of producing academic goods, it is something to be cultivated in universities. Diversity as a concept was fluid, oscillating between the business case, which emphasizes obtainable gains and advantages, and the more traditional social justice-based perception of equality. Although new conceptualizations were embraced, many inequalities were old and persistent:

These equality experiences related to age and academic career, to me they are such issues and yes, this kind of traditional participation of international staff and different ethnic backgrounds, those with a different mother tongue, it's a kind of a long-lasting topic that will certainly be at the heart of this [program] but also the traditional equality and anti-discriminatory work [...] So eventually I overrule ((laughs)) my previous answer when I said that I'd like new themes, but in principle the issues are pretty traditional. (Manager 3)

While new conceptualizations may transcend the traditional, routine approaches to gender equality and raise new issues, they also present varying understandings of the significance of social divisions in the university context. Different axes of inequalities were rarely discussed with only a few references to class and racialized minorities. This may be partly due to the general nature of the research interview questions. However, positions adopted by the middle management interviewees nevertheless indicate the issues potentially on the equality agenda and which remain marginalized. Addressing social divisions is complex, and the expanding concept of diversity required expert input to define its boundaries:

We've asked a certain group of researchers about their thoughts [on diversity and inclusion] related to their research focus. Indeed, we're doing rounds with researchers at the moment, they've been asked to write a working paper. [...] At this point we've started with the points they raise. (Manager 3)

Another challenge to recognizing social divisions relates to how personal experiences, such as exclusion, can be made visible:

Not everyone necessarily wants to speak out about the experiences of being left in the shadows. Some [of the people] are bolder, but when we talk about experiences of racism, for example, we know that it is not necessarily easy to raise them in relation to how the community deals with that. Or if you feel alone in the work community, how do you raise such an issue as a more general question without being stigmatized by it yourself? (Manager 3)

Indeed, the emancipatory potential of equality work is further hindered by the limitations of university-level equality reports, which are typically based on surveys that fail to capture certain aspects of inequality and diversity (Laiho and Jauhiainen, 2017). Equality and non-discrimination work at universities has been accused of ignoring and downplaying issues of racism (e.g. Rastas, 2020). Although international staff were often discussed as potentially disadvantaged due to language practices, and internationality was considered in several interview themes, only the middle manager mentioned above referred to potential experiences of racism.

Middle management perspectives highlighted concerns of the feasibility of gender equality and non-discrimination plans that should better identify issues to be monitored and promoted as well as allocate responsibilities and resources. However, research on managerial universities has criticized such plans altogether as representations of technicalization and the management of gender equality work in the managerial university (see, e.g. Ahmed, 2007; Ikävalko and Brunila, 2011; Prügl, 2011).

The managerial university produces information on the state of equality, but addressing problems and inequalities in practice is difficult. Also, national evaluation of universities has highlighted the need to improve the implementation of reforms in staff equality and well-being and the monitoring of the impact of measures (FINEEC, 2022). Additionally, policies and perspectives seem to focus on future plans without evaluating the past (Timmers *et al.*, 2010), which further increases the need to anchor equality work in the here and now.

"Old" equality is reflected in established routines that focus on knowledge production around equality issues without requiring action. These routines are more administrative than developmental and may serve as a way for middle managers to distance themselves from actual equality efforts. Still, references to routines in equality work show the legitimacy of equality issues in the organization. In this tension, the adoption of new conceptualizations and renaming statutory plans characterizes "new" equality. While these changes can detach equality work from its legal foundations, potentially obscuring social justice issues, they may also increase the visibility of different groups. The use of new conceptualizations can at best open up innovative space for emancipation when it provides a departure from merely going through the motions of equality work. However, broad concepts that emphasize positivity may also obscure inequalities. Even though there's a limited perspective to social divisions that produce inequalities, middle managers recognized problems to a degree. The difficulty of

handling differences and addressing sensitive issues leads us to consider the adequacy and appropriateness of participatory arenas and processes. This issue will be handled next.

### *Formal participation vs. inclusion*

A third tension for equality work was that between the ideal of inclusion and practical participation in strategy work. Universities have become increasingly vocal about their commitments and mission regarding inclusion even in the absence of a generally accepted, clear definition of an inclusive university (Leišytė *et al.*, 2021). We approach the inclusion of staff at the university as their participation in the activities of the university or faculty (e.g. decision-making), their experience of belonging to the university community and, in general, their opportunities to influence the operating conditions of the university. In our research, middle management's views emphasized participation in strategy development and implementation as well as in formal decision-making as a means of inclusion.

Middle management saw participation in strategy development and implementation as the most important form of employee inclusion. Some managers saw the strategy as a significant means to strengthen inclusion. One of them said that the entire community was involved in the strategy: *everybody could contribute with comments or new ideas* (Manager 3). All members of the community were expected to commit to implementing the strategy in their work and their community. On the other hand, staff involvement in strategy work could also be superficial: *[S]trategies are frequently created in isolation. Of course, it's not terribly . . . it's not that kind of a participatory or terribly participatory process* (Manager 10). In that case the implementation of the strategy depended on the interests of the actors themselves. Clear top-down processes with formal participation by the staff and management in drawing up the final strategy emerged. In this case, the strategy was not really implemented at the grassroots level.

In participatory processes diversity meant either pluralistic influence over decision-making or, as the following data extract illustrates, polarization of views that hinders "true democracy":

[I]n my opinion we have a fairly good balance regarding these issues, because both sides are complaining [that there's too much or too little participation]. If only one side was complaining, I'd adjust the situation in the other direction. [...] How to create a university democracy that is a true democracy and not of the loudest or the most experienced ones or something else. (Manager 6)

Here we employ the concept of polyphony—understood as the simultaneous expression of multiple voices arranged in to a whole. This arranging of voices underscores middle manager perspectives to participation: the degree of interest (exemplified by the participation in the strategy processes, see above), the nature of interest (whether it aligns with what middle managers consider appropriate or acceptable) and how these perspectives are used to justify their own action or inaction. As the data extract showed, in large units polyphony could be partially ignored in decision-making because of the perceived contradiction in staff participation needs. The size of the faculty unit can also hinder the inclusion of staff voices, whereas smaller units may offer easier access to decision-makers.

The staff are highly aware [of equality issues] [...] In my opinion the community is very tolerant, diverse and fine, with diverse voices. [...] There's incredible variation of disciplines and people [...] in a relatively compact size. [...] Because of the reasonable amount of people the voices reach the management a little better. That helps. (Manager 4)

Manager's observations highlight communication pathways between staff and management, where diversity is seen as a positive issue supporting manager's work. While polyphony among staff can be seen as an expression of diversity and as such appropriate for equality discussions, the dependence on unit size in possibilities to participate raises the question, whether there is room for equality in the participatory practices and processes themselves.

Managerialist developments increase the tension between inclusion and formal participation and may question the sense in participation overall. Limited timeframes inhibited inclusion. In the interests of the efficiency that is imperative in a managerial university, staff should be guaranteed time to perform basic tasks, which can then be used as an argument for top-down decision-making rather than collegial decision-making. Collegiality is one of the academic ideals which promotes academics' participation in decision-making processes (Spiller, 2010). The link between managerialist university and processes of de-democratization have replaced collegial decision-making with stakeholder-orientated managerialism. This development has been criticized by the academic community (Poutanen *et al.*, 2022).

Individualism in academic work has also increased, influencing the desire to participate: *(. . .) that we care only about our own and that there is no longer such collegial [laughs], and communal [atmosphere]*. (Manager 4) This reflects the competitive nature of the managerial university (Shepherd, 2018): participation in common matters takes time from gaining merit through research, which is crucial to advancing one's academic career (Haapakorpi *et al.*, 2023).

The inclusion of international staff was highlighted in all interviews with middle management. The managers specifically mentioned the language policy of the faculties and units as a challenge to the inclusion and equality of international staff. The use of Finnish as the official language in administrative tasks was seen to limit the inclusion of international personnel.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is that we have international people and we have good international researchers of which we want more. But as long as we act so strongly, in a faculty that uses Finnish, they will not be able to properly participate in practice in this joint effort, in common activities other than those of their own research group. (Manager 7)

Middle management described the language policy and language practices of their universities as diverse, and also as unit and faculty specific. Language ideology, which refers to the understanding of the meaning and value of different languages (see Saarinen *et al.*, 2020), was dominated by English. However, the inclusion of international staff in a Finnish university is not just a language issue. Practices and culture, too, need to be learnt.

The substantive tension between formal (quasi) participation and inclusion arises from the perspective on polyphony: whether this is seen as a problem or as a resource in strategy and decision-making processes. From the data it can be inferred that middle managers do not organize for polyphony and thus there is a lack of systematicity in the processes. Only in relation to equality policies did there seem to be some attempt at inclusivity of perspectives (see Routines vs. emancipation).

While the "old" university emphasized collegial decision-making processes, changes have led to the dismantling of traditional decision-making structures. "New" equality means the inclusion of international staff, but their equality is often reduced to language policies, leaving broader cultural and practical issues marginalized. In discussions of participatory decision-making processes, dimensions of equality tend to fade into the background. The opportunity to hear diverse voices in decision-making was also influenced by unit size: smaller units provided better access to managers, while in larger units, polyphony appeared to be more challenging.

## Discussion and conclusion

Equality work in organization is a contradictory field where controversial elements coexist (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2016) for sandwiched middle managers (Bryman and Lilley, 2009). To resolve inequalities and promote equalities it is important that managers become problem owners of inequalities and agents of change (see more in Lansu *et al.*, 2020). Integrating personal empowerment to gendered organizational change (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016) could be a way of making use of the different approaches to equality work. In our research, we

explored how middle managers approach equality. Middle managers' consideration of equality was gender-oriented and conventional. Other dimensions of equality, e.g. race and whiteness (see also [Rastas, 2020](#)), age or social background, were rarely discussed. This reflects the Finnish gender equality legislation dating back to the 1980s, which focused especially on equality between women and men and is firmly established in equality work. We summed up middle managers' negotiations on equalities into three themes, all of which also expressed tensions. Those themes were: equality as dismantling gender segregation versus meritocracy, equality as routines versus emancipation and equality as inclusion versus formal participation.

The first tension identified—between dismantling gender segregation and meritocracy—highlighted stalling tactics that draw attention to the insufficient problem ownership of the middle managers. Active measures to resolve gender segregation could be perceived as difficult to realize and meritocracy was left unproblematic in this respect. Nonetheless, resolving gender segregation will not be taken off the equality agenda; middle managers saw gender imbalance as a source of problems as well as a negative image issue. A step forward can be linking gender segregation to the quality of organizational processes and demanding greater transparency, both features of managerialist practices (see also [Mackay, 2021](#)). This issue cuts across the “old” and “new” university, raising the question of whether the academic tradition of meritocracy or a managerial view of processes will prevail. Now “old” upholds inequality and “new” does not really challenge this.

The second tension identified—equality as routines versus emancipation—indicated that traditional equality work was questioned as mechanistic but, on the other hand, seeing equality work as part of the running routines, it could become distanced from the middle managers themselves. From the perspective of problem ownership, distancing is a problematic middle management tactic hindering identifying local, unit-specific equality challenges. Adopting new conceptualizations of equality reflects the stage of change in the universities: These conceptual shifts not only align with the business-oriented view to equalities but are also manifestations of the “new” managerial university. The meaning of change is also that of doing something new, even though the issues to be addressed may be something old and remaining unresolved. Given that equality work is grounded in legal obligations, structural inequalities cannot be ignored; however, they are increasingly reframed through managerial discourse, for instance, via new conceptualizations. The relationship between new conceptualizations and equalities is complex, with potentially contradictory outcomes: despite the managerialist connotations, there were attempts at a wider diversity and the inclusion of social differences in equality work under diversity. A central challenge remains: whether negative issues become visible and are allowed onto the new university agenda or whether they remain hidden.

The hierarchization of different axes of equality also poses a challenge to overarching equality and non-discrimination work. [Bhopal and Henderson \(2021\)](#) argue that as a result of the logic of efficiency that drives HE institutions to combine equalities, such as gender and racial equality work, in this combination, gender remains a priority and there is little or no shift in focus to uncomfortable conversations about race and racism in academia. The management of the university are expected to play a major role in the development of universities as anti-racist ([Rastas, 2020](#)). Promoting equalities in the “new” university requires approaches that engage with emerging discourses while also acknowledging the deep-rooted nature of many inequalities and enduring organizational structures. Enacting full problem ownership entails that middle managers take responsibility for developing and implementing strategies that address both these contemporary framings and long-standing challenges. Middle manager's expertise may be used in effectual ways to enhance the feasibility of equality policies and action plans.

Conservatism and right-wing populism are on the rise in Europe and globally with repercussions for equality work (see also [Bencivenga and Drew, 2021](#)). This is visible in Finland, too, where Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's Government is considered the most right-wing in the modern history of the Nordic countries. This may mean that there is indeed a need for those established practices of equality work. Also, a relatively strong legislative foundation

for equality and non-discrimination supports keeping such dimensions on the agenda that could otherwise be criticized for being old fashioned and not in the spirit of producing gains for the academic market. Also, despite criticism of the managerial university, entrenched practices, although incomplete, can sustain and protect equality work (see also [Meyerson and Scully, 1995](#); [Mackay, 2021](#)).

The third tension identified, formal participation versus inclusion, demonstrates that participation is managed as a standard procedure of the university but at the same time the whole motivation for participation becomes dubious. While middle managers acknowledged that, for example, non-Finnish-speaking personnel face challenges in engaging even at a basic level within their immediate work communities, thereby hindering inclusion, the managerialist developments stress competition and individualism, which further discourage participation. This represents a business case that benefits universities (see, e.g. [Elomäki and Ylöstalo, 2021](#); [Fabricius et al., 2017](#)). The expectations and opportunities of international academic staff, building and living academic careers, to realize diversity and achieve university goals should be studied more closely in connection with the practices and culture of participation.

The polyphony attached to participatory processes was not systematically considered as part of the organizing. Our findings indicate that while middle managers recognized the existence of polyphony, concrete actions to engage with or utilize it were largely absent. Whereas the first tension — concerning gender segregation and meritocracy — highlighted acknowledged issues of imbalance (as discussed above), the concept of polyphony draws attention to the broader diversity of university staff beyond these imbalances. For middle managers, this requires a nuanced understanding of the variety of voices they are expected to manage, ensuring that minority perspectives are heard, acknowledged, and included. The second tension, between equality routines and emancipation, further underscores this demand: managing processes and channels for expressing is a key responsibility of middle managers and essential for rendering emancipatory efforts visible. The third tension showed how “new” in university also typically means bigger — reflected, for example, in the size of the units managed. This growth introduces additional challenges to promoting equalities, particularly in developing organized, participatory, and inclusive processes that consider and support polyphony in larger communities. Viewing polyphony as a foundational principle of organizational life challenges its dismissal as either a source of disruption or a justification for inaction. Of course, this calls for revising the methods and extent of university democracy from a wider perspective. The role of middle managers as experts in managing processes is thus crucial for creating practical opportunities for inclusive participation.

Occupying a space between the “old” and the “new” in equality and university change also presents opportunities to disrupt dominant middle management discourses. While some tensions were at least partially managed through acceptance—such as by decoupling or individualizing problems, as [Nielsen \(2021\)](#) suggests, or by distancing issues through general organizational framing, as our findings show (see also [Snickare and Wahl, 2024](#))—there is also potential for synergy. Traditional paradox perspective suggests that tensions are best managed through acceptance and synergy (see [Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2016](#)). Such synergy may emerge where equality goals align with organizational priorities, for example, in processes of internationalization and the inclusion of international staff. The emphasis on internationalization is reinforced by increased financial support from Finland’s main national research funding body, the Research Council of Finland, which enables the recruitment of scholars from abroad through instruments such as the Profi funding program. When these areas are recognized as strategically important, they can open discursive space for a broader understanding of equality and motivate action. To avoid the risk of co-optation, research into the experiences of international staff may help to address difficult issues such as racism. As our data illustrate, there are ways to incorporate researcher input into raising awareness of inequalities. Opening discursive space could mean organizing pathways for collaboration between researchers and middle managers, where the latter’s expertise in identifying operational mechanisms to include such input would be invaluable. Additionally,

middle managers can facilitate the translation of the experiences of marginalized groups into formats that can be addressed through institutional processes. Such endeavours can offer a way to apply and further develop middle managers' competencies.

From a dialectical perspective (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2016), transformation through the confrontation and resolution of contradictions highlights the importance of organizing participatory decision-making practices. Such practices should, first, enable the emergence of divergent views and, second, allow those views to meaningfully influence decisions. Although the procedures for participation were underdeveloped, the discursive perspectives of middle managers reflected an awareness of the need for more democratic arrangements and emphasized the importance of access to management.

To advance similar studies, future interview protocols could adopt a broader focus on the multiple dimensions of equality, since the interview questions posed some limitations in this regard to our study. In particular, future research should further explore how middle management navigates conflicting equality conceptualizations and operates within contradictory fields of equality work.

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