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Non-human policy worlds: an exploration of the Norwegian research and higher education policy

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ABSTRACT

Academia is increasingly populated but remains saturated with problems of exclusion, inequality, and injustice. However, policies aimed to govern the sector are criticized for corrupting the core of the academic practice, overlooking complexities, and perpetuating old and constructing new forms of inequalities. We thus need more empowering ways to design policies which can productively transform academia into good spaces to inhabit. To this end, we take a novel approach by viewing higher education policies as world-making spaces. Through 'social world/arena mapping' of the Norwegian research and higher education policy, we find that the policy articulates diverse worlds with different logics and purposes for academics to inhabit. However, the actors in these worlds remain passive, and seemingly 'universal' actors, able to simultaneously inhabit all the different policy worlds, while systemic inequalities which permeate the sector are largely overlooked. We argue that acknowledging this shortcoming is pivotal to finding new ways to (re)create sustainable spaces in research and higher education that ensure inclusive environments and function as democratic institutions.

KEYWORDS

Academia; higher education policy; policy worlds; social world mapping; Norway

Introduction

The higher education sector is populated by growing numbers of students and scholars around the world (Cantwell and Taylor 2015; Schofer and Meyer 2005), yet academic workplaces are described as increasingly harsh, greedy, and demanding workplaces (Gill and Donaghue 2016; Shore 2010; Torp, Lysfjord, and Midje 2018). Western universities are portrayed as gendered and racialized institutions, with unequal access rooted in gendered or discriminatory cultures (Ahmed 2012; Arday and Mirza 2018; Dubois-Shaik and Fusulier 2017; Heijstra, Steinhorsdóttir, and Einarsdóttir 2017; Johnson, Widnall, and Benya 2018; Valian 2005; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012). Higher education policies aimed to govern this arena and possibly change these conditions are criticized for overlooking the complexity of academia and perpetuating old and constructing new forms of inequalities (Billot 2010; Ruth et al. 2018; Shore 2008).

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One of the main responses to the lack of equality has been to design specific anti-discrimination, gender equality and diversity policies to improve inclusiveness in academia. Gender equality policies have been a focus in Europe, and gender mainstreaming is applied as a strategy (Lomazzi and Crespi 2019). In the EU, for instance, it is now obligatory for higher education institutions to have gender equality action plans to qualify for research grants. Such targeted efforts have some effect, but it is often slow and uneven (Nielsen 2017; Riegraf et al. 2010; Tzanakou 2019). Since exclusion and inequality problems are entrenched in the everyday lives of academics and are not limited to a separate sphere of their activity, we argue that it is also necessary to explore how efforts to foster inclusiveness are accounted for in the more general higher education policies. For policies to create more inclusive and sustainable spaces in academia, they need to address the realistic everyday problems people populating the higher education sector are experiencing. The aim of our study is therefore to illuminate how the general policies governing the higher education are shaping the conditions for potential inclusiveness of academic institutions. We ask: How is the population of higher education and research portrayed in governing policies?

Most current critical analysis either scrutinizes the political ideals promoted by higher education policies or challenge policies as instrumental tools to develop higher education in inclusive and sustainable directions. On one side, the dominant critique is directed toward neoliberal rationales in science policies, such as new public management (NPM) discourses that promote competition and performativity (Perry 2012; Rasmussen, Sætnan, and Tøndel 2019) and (grand) challenge-oriented discourses that promote values of self-mobilization and self-optimizations (Boon and Edler 2018; Kallerud et al. 2013; Kuhlman and Rip, 2018). On the other side, scholars highlight policies' often unintended effects when they distort the complex communities, practices and cultures academics are entrenched in. Especially interpretative policy analysis approaches have shown how higher education policies live complex social lives, where their effects are contingent on the context of implementation (Felt et al., 2009; Wright and Rabo 2010; Shore and Wright, 1999). Yet, policies affect such arrangements by perpetuating stable and cohesive narratives, imaginaries, and symbolic regimes for how academia should be ordered (Felt and Fochler 2012).

This paper takes a novel approach to policy analysis by exploring policies as arenas where academic worlds are crafted. Policies are used to allocate resources and define priorities for development as decision-makers define it, but they also articulate particular worlds for academics. By deconstructing how the policy positions academics within the policy, we are able to provide productive ways to reconcile the discrepancy between higher education policies and lived experience in academia by making visible a multitude of worlds co-existing, rather than paying attention only to a dominant world – as is the case in many critical analysis of the neo-liberal logic. We argue that this approach may give more agency to the actors expected to implement the policy and improve the conditions in academia.

We base our findings on the analysis of the Norwegian research and higher education policy - 'Meld. St. 4: The Long-term plan for research and higher education 2019–2028' (from now referred to as 'the Long-term plan'). The Long-term plan is a comprehensive strategy with high ambitions for developing the Norwegian research and higher education sector and contributing to the Norwegian welfare

state. It is harmonized with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European framework for research and innovation, making the analysis pertinent beyond the Norwegian context. Before we describe how we analyzed the strategy, we give a short overview of the role of higher education policies.

Shaping higher education through policies

Since the Second World War, research and higher education policies have been important public policy domains. Their agenda has changed from conscious political programs to more professionalized and sectorized policies (Elzinga and Jamison 1995), with an increasingly stronger emphasis on excellence and adaptation to international standards (Helsvig 2017; Sørensen and Traweek 2022). These unifying principles and incentives have been widely debated in higher education studies.

As noted, much scholarly critique has been directed toward higher education and related science policies for favoring value systems, questions, and forms of organization based on neoliberal logic, which has exclusionary effects (Delanghe, Muldur, and Soete 2011; Krull 2004; Watermeyer and Olssen 2016). Especially governing regimes labeled NPM are criticized for reducing academics and their scholarly activities to numbers, disregarding academic ideals of the common good and scientific curiosity (Olssen and Peters 2005; Perry 2012; Wright and Rabo 2010), and threatening the richness of academic core practices (Billot 2010; Ferretti et al. 2018; Hemlin and Rasmussen 2006).

Taking gender inequality and imbalance as points in case, scholars have argued that policy discourses and auditing systems connected to excellence keep women at the margins of the academic system (Felt et al., 2009), create mistrust (Shore 2008), and cause anxiety and self-doubt (Billot 2010; Ruth et al. 2018). Furthermore, studies addressing the ideals and discursive construction of academics claim that policies misconstrue the academic. They are, for instance, solidifying the dominance of manager-academics (Deem et al. 2003; Reed and Deem 2002) and promoting the excellent academic as a high-achieving, always-working, male-ideal type (Bautista-Puig, García-Zorita, and Mauleón 2019; Lund 2015).

In sum, the literature argues that higher education policies promote neoliberal governance ideals, distort academic realities, disrupt epistemic practices, and exclude academics. Most of these policy analyses emphasize general discourses and overarching rationales of policy goals rather than deconstructing the often-inconsistent elements that make up a policy. The effect of the generalizing policy readings can be paralyzing to those expecting to perform the changes, resulting in 'dead' documents (Ahmed 2012) or confusion (Shore 2010).

To find more empowering ways to move forward, our policy analysis explores policies as multidimensional spaces with various epistemic, spatial/material, temporal, symbolic, and social features (Felt 2009, 47, 51). We examine how policies craft worlds *within* the policy – what we call 'policy worlds'. By policy worlds, we mean the kind of collective spaces that the policy articulates for academics to do their knowledge work, to cooperate with others, to teach, and, conversely, who is included or excluded from such spaces. This ground-up analysis may allow us to identify more nuance in the policy beyond generative discourses. To understand how policies can better account for inequalities, we thus

suggest that the first step is to examine how policies account for the people inhabiting the sector.

‘Social world/arena mapping’, an approach to situational analysis (Clarke 2005, 108–25), is well suited for such an endeavor because it does not depart from pre-set ideas of what a higher education policy should contain. Instead, it allows us to look for how the context of a situation (in this case, policy worlds and the academics who populate them) is not separate from the situation within which it was produced (policy document). We thus explore how the conditions for academic work and academics are carved out within the policy itself (Clarke 2005, 71). The analytical questions which guide our inquiry are: How does higher education policy articulate worlds for academics? What roles do they attribute to academics within them? And, how are features of academic realities, such as gender, discrimination, or other challenges, accounted for (or not) in these worlds?

A grounded approach to deconstructing policies

This paper builds on a document analysis of several policy documents and debates related to the ‘Meld. St. 4: The Long-term plan for research and higher education 2019–2028’, including the recommendations report from The Standing Committee on Education and Research (Recommendation 164 S), the report from the parliamentary meeting (Nr. 51, 19 February 2019), and the stakeholder comments on the report. While there have been other policies aimed at formatting the sector (such as Meld. St.14: *Internationalisation of education*, Meld. St.16: *Culture and quality in higher education*, Meld. St.25: *Humanities in Norway*), the *Long-term plan* is the most comprehensive policy to date. It is developed by the Ministry of Education and Research developed, but all ministries are expected to have a stake in and allocate resources toward its implementation. The plan’s overarching goals are to (1) stimulate research and development in the business and public sector; (2) meet grand societal challenges; (3) develop professional communities of excellent quality. As such, the plan sets premises for how the sector should be organized and what it should do. The policy’s scope makes it a good case study for the explorative inquiry into the types of worlds it crafts for academics and how inequalities and various struggles in the sector are accounted for – or silenced.

In Norway, there are also policies directly targeting equality and diversity issues, such as the Anti-Discrimination Law (LOV-16 June 2017-51) or indirectly through funding mechanisms by The Norwegian Research Council, which has a separate *Policy for gender balance and gender perspectives in research and innovation*, promoting equal representation in project leadership. The University and College Act (LOV-1 April 2005-15) obliges universities to work actively to improve gender equality and diversity through action plans. These measures recognize a wide range of problems in the higher education sector (Suboticki and Lagesen 2022; Suboticki and Sørensen 2022), however, it is still evident that equality policies are downplayed or overruled in other policy domains (Flikke 2022). Thus, it becomes relevant to investigate how the Long-term plan potentially carves out space for novel approaches to equality policies.

Document analysis is often used as a means of triangulation, for example, in combination with interview studies. The analysis presented here can be further used for this purpose, but the significance of policy documents as agents makes an independent analysis pertinent. We depart from an understanding that policy documents are not

merely representations of governing ideas but texts with material and discursive agency beyond the explicitly stated policy purpose. We thus understand policies as one among a multitude of ordering mechanisms and not as separate domains that exist at different levels to practice. To analyze the Long-term plan as a stand-alone situation in itself, we use Clarke's 2005 method of 'social world/arena maps'.

We started our analysis through a close reading of the strategy. We first marked all the places where academics are articulate as subjects (e.g. 'employees', 'educators', 'researchers', 'women', 'communities') and where academic work is mentioned (e.g. 'research', 'education', 'interdisciplinarity', 'cooperation'). From these places where actors or action was identified, we mapped all the infrastructures, practices, artifacts and organizational tools which formed part of the situation. 'The academic' was thus our only predefined analytical starting point, while all other elements were identified inductively. We used in vivo coding to keep the original wording for the elements. Once we had a comprehensive overview of the policy, we grouped the elements into collectives with a unified purpose for academic activity. The focus was not on specific areas of expertise, such as medicine or climate change, but on the relationships and practices which run across these fields. In total, we identified seven collectives rephrased as seven policy worlds. While no worlds have been excluded during our analysis, we did merge what we called 'the private world' with 'the career world' as we understood that these referred to the same type of collective. While the boundaries between these worlds are porous (Clarke 2005, 111), and in practice, they would overlap, we focus on their distinction in the initial representation of the worlds. In conclusion, we return to a discussion about the worlds' relationship and how they form a complex policy landscape. In our presentation of the worlds, we also discuss the societal context and compare the articulations in the strategy with findings from empirical research to assess how realistic they account for challenges identified in the sector.

Mapping policy worlds

Seeking to understand how an overarching policy can foster inclusion and equality better, we pay particular attention to whether and how actors become visible, symbolically, or concretely, within different worlds and what roles and relationships they are attributed to in the analysis of the Norwegian *Long-term plan*. We have identified seven key worlds, which we have named: (1) the production/consumption world, (2) the competitive world, (3) the communal world, (4) the learning world, (5) the material world, (6) the public world, and (7) the career world. As we discuss later, these different worlds allow different kinds of inhabitants; some are aligned, while others contradict.

Production/Consumption world

The most pronounced policy world in the Long-term plan is what we call a *production/consumption world* that articulates knowledge, technology, and people as commodities in a supply and demand production chain. This world is typically expressed in an economic language of investments, competitive gains, and increased value, as this quote illustrates:

The ability and willingness to use new technology are crucial for increased productivity and value creation. This presupposes a high level of knowledge and competence in the workforce and a good flow of knowledge between academia and working life and business. Investments in knowledge and competence are therefore becoming even more important to utilise the potential for value creation in new technology, facilitate a green transformation of the business community, and prevent the technological changes from creating and reinforcing social inequality. (Meld.St.4, p.18)

Researchers and educators thus have an implied role as producers or consumers of knowledge and technology. On one side, they supply politicians, public companies, or business owners with relevant data, innovations, and skilled employees. On the other hand, consumers demand new knowledge, technologies, and people to advance their production processes.

Whilst previous literature notes that academic living spaces based on neo-liberal logic perpetuate divisions (Anderson-Gough and Brown 2008; Sümer and Sümer 2020), the quote above explicitly articulates the role of academics as contributing to preventing social inequalities and enabling green transformation. As we will soon show, such imperatives are fundamental to the ‘communal world’ within the policy – a world both contradicting and overlapping with the production/consumption world. As part of the production/consumption world, however, academics are articulated as collectively part of a supply and demand chain that supports and builds increased value for trade and industry and implicitly supports the Norwegian welfare state. Thus, the production/consumption world is linked to a sense of ‘citizenship’ in terms of duties but without associations to its potential benefits. The academic’s role remains a commodifiable resource, expected to contribute to the knowledge economy (Temple, 2012).

Furthermore, knowledge, technology, and people are articulated as *mobile* and *shared* commodities that can either be exchanged. There is an implicit expectation that these resources are not context-bound but transferrable and universally applicable. Such sharing produces added value according to the plan:

Openness and knowledge sharing are a prerequisite for all research, and greater openness in research is important for several reasons. It can contribute to more and better use of knowledge by giving both the research community as a whole, professional users in business and industry, and the general public access to the results of research. (Meld.St.4, p.31)

Empirical studies of how research works in practice, on the other side, show how much extra labor and translation work individual researchers are doing to be able to conduct research in new locations, and to enable shared knowledge (Coey 2018; Davies 2020; Metcalfe, 2017), and how the implied expectations of productivity and mobility are perceived as barriers for a future in research by early career scholars (Sørensen and Korsnes 2022). Case studies of transparency and openness in science also show the complexity and specificity of these ideals in practice in ways that include and exclude them (Nerlich et al. 2018). In the production/consumption world, the ideal of openness remains an unquestionable ideal, leaving the producers in the chain committed to sharing. In a communal, democratic perspective, such sharing is easy to defend morally. Still, in framing a production line, it can quickly be perceived as being the dividend and exploited.

Competitive world

Building on a similar logic as the production/consumption world, the following prominent world articulated in the plan is a *competitive world*. This world center on Norwegian university environments striving to achieve world-leading status and excellence:

World-leading academic environments contribute to research results that provide new insights and to ground-breaking solutions and innovations with the potential to change our lives. (Meld.St. 4, p.23)

The plan is saturated with the purpose of Norwegian academia to gain a high profile and recognition in the international research and innovation community. According to the policy plan, such recognition can be achieved through international publication rankings, positions on international panels, cutting-edge innovations, or winning grants. This world coincides with the broader trend in European science policies emphasizing competition, excellence, and innovation (Jessop, 201; Sørensen, Bloch, and Young 2016). What is particular about how academics are articulated in this world is that they are described as the best and most talented people from across the globe yet presented as ‘Norwegian researchers’ in the international arena. The background of the researchers and the diversity representing Norway is thus subdued and neglected.

Demographically, however, Norwegian higher education institutions are characterized by an increasing number of international employees, whereas Norwegian citizens with immigrant backgrounds or minority status are underrepresented among faculty (Askvik and Drange 2019; Gunnes et al. 2016). Empirical studies of the experiences of international scholars in the Nordic region point to the phenomena ‘cultural cloning’ and lack of acceptance or diversity in research practices (Maximova-Mentzoni et al. 2016). Part of the reason for the lack of diversity is racialized and gendered dynamics in recruitment and promotion practices (Lund 2015; Mählck 2015).

Despite the expressions of Norwegianness, academic excellence is still articulated as international in its own right and not as a goal that can be achieved within the borders of a nation:

A hallmark of world-leading research and education environments is a large degree of international cooperation. Outstanding researchers seek collaboration with the leading research communities, regardless of geography. (Meld.St.4, p.30)

Thus, to be competitive, researchers’ epistemic work is expected to be organized through international networks and collaborations and in cooperation with the public and business sectors. The demand for researchers to be mobile, also articulated in the production/consumption world, is thus enforced in the competitive world. In the competitive world, people inhabiting academia are not merely producers and/or consumers but also positioned as entrepreneurs and business developers. Mobility funds for researchers to travel abroad, as well as commercialization agents and Technology Transfer Offices (TTO), are proposed as concrete measures to help academics become better business developers. Previous research has highlighted how such infrastructures can skew the distribution of resources and contribute to elitism and inequality (Langfeldt et al. 2013) or favor a ‘sportification of science’ that promotes values of self-mobilization and self-optimization (Kaldewey 2018, 164). In the plan, however, such infrastructures and practices are not problematized, and the quest for world-leading status appears equally beneficial for all.

Communal world

The third world we identify we call *the communal world*. In this space research and higher education is part of a global community that works collectively to solve global grand challenges such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and emerging insecurities such as contagious diseases and viruses, antibiotic resistance, and food security. It is a world characterized by reciprocity and shared solidarity, not competition. Here, *the Long-term plan* articulates a research and higher education community that participates in a global collective volunteer work scheme (*no.* ‘dugnadsarbied’).

From the Norwegian side, we will contribute to the global voluntary knowledge work. (...) For example, we have strong agricultural knowledge environments that contribute significantly to the international knowledge building around food security, climate scientists who contribute to the UN Climate Panel, and medical disciplines that contribute to the global work of developing vaccines. (Meld.St.4, p.24)

Contrary to the production/consumption world, the moral codes connected to ‘dugnadsarbeid’ attributes the sector with a humanitarian role and moral responsibility to meet the needs of the global society. Voluntary work is common in many Norwegian organizations and communities, but such work is often gendered, leaving uncredited academic household work to women (Macfarlane and Burg 2019).

The rise of grand challenge-oriented discourses in policy has been viewed with skepticism (Boon and Edler 2018), partly because they are ill-defined and can leave much interpretation to particular actors which first come to the fore during implementation (Kallerud et al. 2013). However, the plan only sets certain expectations for academics:

The best minds, regardless of discipline, sector, or national background, must join forces to produce the knowledge we need. (Meld.St.4, p.24)

The plan thus prescribes that the most talented individuals must work together regardless of their disciplinary background, research focus, or nationality, forgoing individual academic identities and profiles. Academic outputs are described as reciprocal in the ‘global knowledge building’ leading to benefits for all (Meld. St. 4: 33), by producing boundaryless solutions that contribute to ‘the global knowledge pool’ (Meld. St. 4: 24). This is questionable when we from empirical studies know there are important gender biases and that knowledge outputs are not distributed nor valued equally (Fox 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick, Glynn, and Huges 2013; Rørstad and Aksnes 2015).

These communal articulations are challenging when we compare them to the practices expected of academics in the competitive and production/consumption world. How can academics navigate between conflicting criteria and value systems? Empirical studies highlight challenges to enacting solidarity when there are tensions in academic identities (Tjora, 2018; Sørensen and Traweek 2022). It does not mean that the worlds are not at odds, but the plan lacks an acknowledgment of and possible solution for tension that may occur.

Learning world

The fourth world we found prominent in the plan is the *learning world*. With this world, academia is described as a cutting-edge interactive community, emphasizing educators that use the newest technologies and knowledge in their teaching and give students hands-on research experience. In this world, the boundaries between educators and students are diminishing, as well as between educators and researchers. Overlapping with the production world, educators are expected to produce a qualified workforce for the Norwegian labor market. Still, more so, the learning world should also contribute to nurturing socially responsible and reflexive Norwegian citizens that will uphold democratic values and counteract radicalization by learning to think critically:

The education system, from kindergarten to higher education and research, has a significant role to play in the work to develop democracy, protect human rights, promote equality and inclusion and counteract radicalisation. (Meld.St.4, p.12)

To achieve this objective, *the Long-term plan* describes new demands for educators populating this world, emphasizing cutting-edge knowledge, especially digitalization, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), and research competencies.

Norwegian higher education must be research-based, i.e. it is prepared and provided by academic environments where the employees have research competence, and where many are researchers themselves. (...) Students must be integrated early into the academic community and gain insight and training in research-like activities at all levels of education. (Meld.St.4, p.28)

The educator is rarely referred to, but articulations of teaching suggest that the division between educators, professionals, researchers, and students is blurred. For instance, it calls for more educators with professional experience in fields such as health care and social work, or between researchers and teachers. The latter may be promising, as academics are conflicted with the task of separate research and teaching (Billot 2010). However, it may further strengthen the erosion and tension in academic identities (Winter 2009; Winter and O'Donohue 2012).

Moreover, in this arena, the student is depicted as part of a homogenous mass, and not as a group with highly different needs, positionalities, and affinities. With a focus on research and ICT, the plan does not address organizational, material, and normative arrangements necessary to create learning environments that, in themselves, are inclusive. For instance, the plan only mentions how the proportion of women students is around 60% and students with international backgrounds at 13% (St.Meld 4, p.30). Diversity among students is mainly framed as beneficial to building international networks (St.Meld 4, p.28), but not as a challenge. Similarly, highly skewed gender imbalances in some programs are not problematized or in need of solutions such as role models or perspectives in curricula. Most emphasis is put on how the physical transformation of learning environments can positively influence teaching. Still, as we will see in the following section, also here the actors populating the sector remain passive.

Material world

The fifth world, *the material world*, is closely linked with the learning world, but it is articulated in a much broader sense in the *Long-term plan*. It describes an academic setting where physical structures such as research centers and buildings are shaping academic work, mainly by facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration and breaking down barriers. The plan articulates physical infrastructures as material structures that can instigate innovation, create quality in education and research, foster interdisciplinarity and cooperation, facilitate digitalization, and shape how academics relate to one another and practice research and education. Moreover, material environments can build bridges between sectors (academia, business, local communities), as well as between students, teachers, and researchers:

A well-designed building can invite collaboration, to cross -disciplinary boundaries, and better communication between students, students, and researchers, and between academia, business, and the local community. (Meld.St.4, p.78)

For example, the building and infrastructures are articulated as objects that produce a better foundation for professional innovation and economic development by localizing education, basic research and applied research. The plan describes a material world that can ‘enable quality in education and research and develop and communicate knowledge, identity, and values’ (Meld. St. 4, p.79). Conversely, buildings are articulated as spaces that can inhibit cooperation and desired practices, e.g. new teaching practices:

A poorly designed building can hinder such collaboration, promote one-way communication from teachers to students and prevent good use of digitisation, entrepreneurship, and external activities. (Meld.St.4, p.78)

The material world is expected to produce desired changes in the sector. This articulation of the material world builds on the classical idea that political, economic, and social interests influence the design of our physical environments and shape the society of such spaces (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). In practice, however, users of such spaces are not passive but also reshape and resist their material surroundings (Bijker and Law, 1994).

Still, academics are represented as moldable subjects within this world. Although the plan mentions that buildings are influenced by the societies that they are part of, it does not necessarily operationalize how this mutual relationship between academia and society transpires.

Decisions about university and college buildings shape where and how students, academic staff, and other knowledge workers live, learn, study, innovate and communicate. Although a campus may be an independent entity, it will depend on and influence the society of which it is a part of. (Meld.St4, p.78)

This is the first acknowledgment that subjects populating academia also live lives beyond academia. However, the relationship between academia, the public, and academics’ individual lives is more pronounced in the following two worlds.

Public world

The sixth world we identified is the *public world*, described as a meeting place between academics and the public. The world is mainly articulated as a space enacted through media and participation in public life, where different ideas, norms, and values are negotiated and debated:

Well-functioning media, together with cultural life and civil society organisations, are part of the infrastructure for public dialogue and participation in society and a prerequisite for a democratic society. Here ideas, attitudes, and values are expressed and debated, here cultural communities are formed and tensions and disagreements are processed. (Meld.St.4, p.12)

As the quote shows, mistrust and conflict are features of this world, and it is the only space where such tensions are recognized in the document. Increased social media use and access to information are seen as causing mistrust, false news, and relativization of the truth. Here, it is the academics' responsibility to participate in public dialogue to inform the public about good knowledge, to prepare them for the uptake of new technologies, and build a trustworthy and peaceful relationship between the public and academia.

Universities and colleges are articulated as actors with good norms, which they need to instill in the broader society.

In changing times with a lack of predictability and the need for societal transition, higher education institutions can contribute to stability by interpreting complex events and making them comprehensible in the public debate. (Meld.St.4, p.77)

The public, on the other hand, is conceptualized as problematic. For example, the plan describes how publics may resist new low-carbon innovations necessary for sustainability transitions, whilst academics should explain why such transformations are necessary. Although humanities and social scientists are identified as those best equipped for this work, also natural scientists are expected to have greater societal reflection, e.g. through transparent and responsible research and innovation practices.

The public world thus builds on principal democratic values such as transparency, a knowledge-based society, and deliberation, but predominantly as a one-way knowledge transfer from academia to the public. There is no mention of how the public may be a critical mass holding academic worlds accountable for questions such as equality and inclusion or productive ways for how they can be better engaged in the co-construction of new knowledge and technologies. Moreover, one of the reasons why it has been hard to build trust between science and society is because of the growing multiplicity of publics and their values, knowledges, and concerns (Chilvers and Kearnes, 2020). Similarly, it also matters who is doing the research, and with whom trust is built. When the scientific community is not representative of the population, for instance concerning gender and diversity (Brandser and Sümer, 2017; Steine, Gunnes, and Wendt 2020), trust in scientific outputs is more difficult to achieve.

Career world

The *career world* intersects with all the worlds we have outlined and constitutes a space where academics are the most explicitly articulated, especially in terms of how they can carve out individual career trajectories. According to *the Long-term plan*, this world should be populated by young, excellent, yet diverse, people:

We need a combination of diversity and quality: Not everyone should be good at the same thing, but everyone should be good. (Meld.St.4, p.6)

This quote suggests a somewhat paradoxical expectation that academics need to be ‘the best’ and set themselves apart as ‘unique’. The plan articulates the demand for academics that are talented, excellent, and younger, as well as with appropriate diversity and gender balance in the following quote:

We must succeed better in recruiting the best talents, and we must bring down the average age of doctoral candidates. We are still far from exploiting the potential of the entire population, both in terms of diversity and gender balance in top academic positions. (Meld.St.4, p.27)

This is a clear promotion of heterogeneity, with many references throughout the plan as to how institutional mechanisms can be utilized to create better conditions for inclusion. These include management and recruitment strategies, different types of funding support mechanisms, mobility support funds, bilateral agreements with international partners, and networks. However, there is a large body of literature that shows that inclusion in the academic career track, especially top positions, is full of barriers – and where a focus on excellence is precisely detrimental to women (Brandser and Sumer, 2017)

The only barrier recognized by the plan for being included in this community is the challenge of women’s work-life balance. It is, thereby, the only space where gender inequalities are mentioned explicitly in the plan. Solutions proposed for this shortcoming are incentives specifically targeting women in top positions:

(. . .) good conditions and opportunities to combine the research career with family life are important for developing and retaining more female top researchers. (Meld.St.4, p.29)

In this quote, the plan only characterizes family life as problematic for top women academics. Welfare benefits such as child-care and other services are presented as making careers in academia desirable for women. Research shows, however, that early career scholars express great ambiguity about pursuing an academic career due to the lack of work-life balance (Sørensen and Korsnes 2022; Ylijoki 2013), and that increasing precarity in academic careers has gendered effects (Murgia and Poggio, 2018). We also know that stereotypes and discourses of ambitions are entangled with gender (Benschop et al. 2013; Reuben, Sapienza, and Zingales 2014).

Further, the plan articulates a world in deficit, where numerous infrastructures and resources must be used to attract a highly skilled yet diverse group of people. Although the career world is the most actor-center, private life is only described as an obstacle for women to having a place in this world. Diversity is described as desired and needed in academia, but not as a feature of Norwegian academia. In what follows, we discuss the consequences of a lack of concretization of actors and action.

Concluding remarks: inhabiting policy worlds

The outset of our analysis was to find novel ways for how higher education policy can better account for and address inequalities and exclusion in academia. We analyzed the primary Norwegian research and higher education policy as a space that carves out space which ‘enable actors to intervene and perform in this world in specific ways’ (Felt 2009, 235).

Contrary to studies that stress that policies are reductionist of both academics and their work (Boon and Edler 2018; Olssen and Peters 2005; Perry 2012), we find that the policy assembles a multitude of orders with different logics, aims, infrastructures, materialities, and roles of researchers and educators. Although we identify neoliberal logics as an important ordering mechanism, they do not permeate all policy aspects. They are mainly prevalent in the production/consumption and competitive worlds. Still, we also find articulations of spaces where principles of solidarity dominated or where teaching was acknowledged as a cornerstone of academic practice. Highlighting this diversity and richness in the policy landscape could open various ways to populate academia and thus be more inclusive of a diversity of academic profiles.

The shortcoming of the strategy is that, despite this multiplicity of worlds, there is a lack of sensitivity toward the diverse population that academics constitute. Instead, the imagined inhabitants of the policy worlds are seemingly ‘universal’ actors, able to simultaneously inhabit all the different policy worlds. Academics are mainly articulated as knowledge producers, representatives of the Norwegian population, employment category, resources, or as women or foreigners, but they remain subjects without agency. Buildings are attributed more agency to mold and transform research and higher education than academics. Not attributing researchers’ and educators’ active voices makes them appear as ‘implicated actors’ (Clarke 2005, 46). Thus, the plan carves out worlds with passive subjects, not worlds constructed by subjects. Therefore, the worlds articulated by the Long-term plan is a space without ‘living’ subjects, i.e. humans.

The application of ‘social world/arena mapping’ as developed by Clarke (2005) enabled our analysis of the multiplicity within the policy and made it possible to see how actors were visible or invisible and what roles and relations they were attributed to. In the next instance, such a grounded approach to deconstructing policies makes it possible to point out concretely where in the policies there are contradicting or overwhelming expectations to academics that, in effect, function as marginalizing and exclusionary.

Lack of articulation of actors and their agency makes it difficult to understand how academics, as individuals and collectives, can navigate between different worlds. It can create the expectation that academics can do everything and be everywhere, which is, by default, exclusionary of a majority. A lack of attention to people in academia also results in a policy where inequality and exclusion are not made visible. Our analysis finds that differences merely appear as features in the career world, with little reference to how other worlds in academia are gendered or exclusionary (Felt et al., 2009; Valian 2005; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012). Given that problems with inclusion and diversity are not merely produced at the local level, they are systemic, recognizing them as features of the academic landscape as a whole is crucial. Moreover, it helps avoid the assumption that all demands in the policy affect everyone equally.

For research and higher education policies to be good steering documents for the sector, they need to account for the academic reality and respond to their needs. Policies are not meant to micromanage individual academics, but we argue that it is problematic when the policy says little about the problems actors populating the sector are phased with or how they can produce the desired higher education sector. Explicitly acknowledging the tensions and inequalities in the higher education sector and how they shape academic lives can help re-humanize policies and contribute to (re)create sustainable living spaces in research and higher education. This argument is not only relevant for higher education policies, but to policies more general.

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