

Menopause Policies in Neoliberal English Universities: Continuing Stigmatisation and Intersectional Marginalisation

Dr. Hyun-Joo Lim¹, Kristine Brance²

Bournemouth University, UK

Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of employees going through peri- and post- menopause through the critical lens of neoliberal Higher Education (HE) and intersectionality. There has been a recent surge of public discourse around menopause in the UK and increasing efforts to destigmatise and raise awareness of the menopause, exemplified by development of menopause policies, joining Menopause Pledge and creating menopause support networks/cafes. However, how effective they are in practice is unknown. To address this gap, our British Academy/Leverhulme funded project explores the (in)effectiveness of menopause policies and support in English HE institutions. The data is drawn from an online survey with 153 employees who are affected by menopause and three focus groups with protected characteristics in English universities.

Our findings suggest that institutional support is patchy and superficial without being translated into transformative practice, largely relying on individual wellbeing support officers' initiatives. Menopause policies are mostly regarded as box-ticking exercises or PR stunts. Our findings clearly evince the continuing stigmatisation of menopause and discrimination in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England. The intersection with disabilities, neurodivergence and other health conditions had aggravating effects on employees. This led to negative impacts on employees' career and mental/physical health. The data also indicates overriding distrust in HR's support for employees affected by and suffering from menopausal symptoms. Drawing on these, we argue that under the neoliberal managerialism in HE, profound structural and cultural shifts around menopause is hard to achieve because neoliberal approaches prioritise individualised solutions and productivity over staff wellbeing. We additionally argue that deeply gendered organisational culture and marginalised status of menopause pose serious challenges to providing sufficient support for employees. To transform this deeply entrenched gender structure and culture, effective leadership and mandatory training for managers, leaders and staff is required.

Keywords: discrimination, gender, intersectionality, menopause, neoliberal HE, stigmatisation