

Editorial

Introduction to Special Issue on Gender and Leadership and a Future Research Agenda

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1. Introduction

Despite the feminisation of universities in terms of their student intake [1,2], formal positions of academic leadership in higher education remain concentrated in male hands. Thus, for example, in the EU, 79 per cent of those in (Grade A) professorial positions in higher educational institutions (HEIs) are men, as are 79 per cent of those in the most senior leadership position of Rector/President/Vice Chancellor [3]. Little attention is paid by HEIs to the masculinisation of leadership in higher education, although this lack of diversity is seen as inhibiting research innovation [4]; limiting economic growth [5]; while research on business contexts [6] suggests that it is unhelpful in terms of governance, sustainability and the utilization of talents, however defined. It is also of course a social justice issue since in open competitive educational systems women are typically the high educational achievers, although they are under-represented in formal leadership positions globally. Since horizontal segregation continues to exist at academic staff level in HEIs in Western Society, women's under-representation in leadership positions has implications for the normalisation of gendered constructions of valued knowledge.

There is an increasing appreciation of the importance of context for the identification of leaders and a movement away from a focus on traits [7]. Concepts such as distributed leadership [8] sit uneasily with the very clear hierarchical structure of HEIs. In organisations where what purport to be typically feminine characteristics are valued, there is little impact on the predominantly male profile of leadership positions. Hence this *Special Issue on Gender and Leadership*.

2. Current Volume

Issues related to gender and leadership are not peculiar to a particular country. This *Special Issue* presents data from Australia and New Zealand, Portugal, Sweden, UK, Ireland and Canada. The methodology in these studies is broadly qualitative. Thus, for example, both Fitzgerald [9] and Carvalho and Diogo [10] use a narrative methodology; Harford [11] uses edited life stories within the life history research tradition; while Burkinshaw et al. [12] use in-depth interviews and seminars. Acker and Millerson [7] use a highly innovative approach involving a collaborative autoethnography by a mother and daughter; while Peterson [13] uses a content and contextual analysis of job advertisements for Vice Chancellors.

Three of the six articles in this *Special Issue* explore women's experience of leadership roles in academia, reflecting a focus on women's voices: an important, if not sufficient element in challenging the assumption that gender is organisationally irrelevant. Harford's [11] study involves interviews with 21 women professors on their experiences in Irish universities 2000-2017. The majority of these were single, divorced or solo parents: a not atypical pattern. Four key themes were generated during the analysis. Firstly, these women regarded universities as operating according to male-definitions of merit. Thus, they challenged assumptions that universities are gender neutral meritocracies [14–16].

Secondly, these women professors had made a strategic choice not to engage in senior management, at least partly because they saw it as unattractive. Thirdly, they saw senior management as disinterested in their employees' caring responsibilities, while simultaneously perpetuating stereotypical patterns as regards caring activities, such as pastoral care, within the HEI. Finally, they emphasized the importance of being encouraged to apply for senior roles and having networks of support, including mentors. Thus, these women highlight gendered patterns within universities and are not interested in perpetuating the existing masculinist structures, cultures and practices.

Fitzgerald [9] focuses on the experiences of 30 senior leaders i.e., women in senior management positions including Deputy Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors and Deans in Australia and New Zealand. She found that these women face a number of tensions and ambiguities in their everyday working lives revolving around 'looking good' and 'being good'. As senior leaders, they are required to negotiate an inherently masculine culture which their very presence disrupts. In the context of 'looking good', their dress and physical appearance, rigorously monitored by both men and women, is perceived as needing to be 'masked' to reduce the disruption which their 'out of place' bodies create. In addition, they must 'be good', disciplining not only their appearance but also their behaviours so that their femininity is acceptable to their male peers. Thus, this article highlights the pressures on women in senior leadership positions arising from the existing male dominated masculinist culture.

Using a narrative methodology, Carvalho and Diogo [10] look at the accounts of two of the seven women who have ever been Rectors in the Portuguese university system. Their research suggests that they develop narratives about accessing these positions involving achievement, hard work and powerful male sponsors. They tend for the most part to see their careers and their leadership experience as gender neutral. There are occasional implicit references to their bodies and to their use of a more facilitative, consultative style of leadership- but the dominant impression is that these women do not see the organisational structure or culture as gendered. Such narratives may contribute to reinforcing the male norm that leads other women to blame themselves for not being able to progress. This inhibits the creation of an organisational culture that is helpful to women. Their narratives highlight the inadequacy of an 'add women and stir' approach.

These articles cumulatively suggest that women who are least comfortable with masculinist structures, cultures and identities are unlikely to be in the most senior leadership positions in higher education: not least because these positions are unattractive to them given these characteristics. Thus, it is not perhaps surprising that those who are at Rector/Vice Chancellor level have low levels of gender awareness and for the most part, present themselves as fitting into these structures. Similar patterns have been documented in other male dominated contexts such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics [17].

The three remaining articles are concerned with wider issues. Burkinshaw et al. [12] focus on gendered regimes in a UK higher education context, describing these as the 'interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing gender inequalities in all work organisations'. They build on earlier work [18] and present a conceptual framework. They highlight the 'blatant disregard of plurality' in HE institutions and are ambivalent about the role played by sponsorship as reflected in 'taps on the shoulder' in perpetuating male dominance in masculinist organisations (a similar ambivalence emerges in Harford [11]). They also suggest that such patterns are unlikely to promote real diversity. They highlight the importance of covert processes in perpetuating gendered regimes [16].

Acker and Millerson [7] are mother and daughter and focus on the similarities and differences in their careers as heads of department (separated by 13 years) in the Canadian higher educational system. Both of them assumed these middle management roles as 'good citizens', with little preparation, no clear role definition and a heavy workload. As they saw it, they had little real power, prioritised caring for their colleagues and found dealing with conflict between those colleagues the most difficult aspect of this leadership role. The differences they identified included the increasing presence of women academic staff, albeit that men continued to dominate the senior leadership positions; the encroachment of managerialism with the effective devaluing of middle management positions, and the reduction

in both administrative and teaching supports-patterns which might also be related to variation in discipline and institution. Their work highlights the importance of ethnographies, particularly of those in early/mid leadership positions and of focusing on leadership in context. Interestingly only the daughter identified herself as a leader, arguably reflecting wider cultural pressures surrounding the gendering of leadership.

Peterson [13] focuses on one element in the recruitment of Vice Chancellors in Sweden viz the job advertisement. Drawing on recruitment data from 27 HEIs involving 85 recruitment processes, she shows that a shift in the leadership ideal has taken place over the 1990–2018 period. Thus, whereas the majority of the 1990s advertisements included mainly stereotypical masculine words such as competitive, strong, tough, decisive and driven, by the 2000s more stereotypical female words were included such as cooperative, communicative, taking responsibility for issues related to equality, being a good listener, etc. Across the entire period, there were more references to stereotypically male than stereotypically female ideal leadership characteristics, although the characteristic which was mentioned most often was a stereotypically feminine one (i.e., cooperative/collaborative). However, although there were job advertisements which included only masculine leadership ideals, there were none that included only feminine leadership ideals. Thus, feminine characteristics were added to, but did not replace the masculine ones. The proportion of women holding Vice Chancellor positions in Sweden over this period increased from seven per cent in 1990 to 59 per cent in 2015: mirroring the change in the advertisements. The recent fall in the proportion of women at this level (down to 33 per cent in 2018); the fact that no exclusively feminine ideal existed and that the feminine words have not increased substantially since 2000 does suggest that there is a kind of inbuilt systemic resistance even in a Swedish context. Since the most common of the masculine words is goal oriented/results driven it also seems possible that they reflect a managerialist as well as gendered perspective.

These articles make an important contribution to the area of gender and leadership. A future research agenda is outlined below, including elements in the call which did not generate submissions.

3. Future Research Agenda

The articles submitted for the *Special Issue* did not tackle the efficacy of interventions (a topic that was included in the call). There are interesting mainstreaming initiatives such as Athena SWAN awards (in the UK, Ireland and Australia) and ADVANCE Institutional transformation initiatives (in the US). Even in those departments which received the highest Athena Swan award (i.e., gold) there was relatively little emphasis on change at senior level; and even where it existed the focus was largely on encouraging and training women. Thus, the implicit assumption was that women, not the organisation, were 'the problem'. Furthermore, such awards have had very little impact on the proportion of women at professorial level in STEM in the UK—the area that they were initially directed at (although the proportion of women at that level in non-STEM areas has increased) [19].

ADVANCE embeds and fosters committed gender aware leadership as a key element in promoting organisational transformation. This differentiates it from Athena Swan. Both raise awareness of gender, favour a data driven approach, focus on infrastructural resources, planning and monitoring and attempt to tackle the organisational culture. However, ADVANCE [20,21] underlines the importance of supportive leaders in formal positions of power, committed to gender equality, who can recognise and challenge stereotypical thinking, diagnose biases in criteria and procedures and can hold each other to account at key points in the evaluation/recruitment process. By virtue of their formal position, they have access to various kinds of knowledge and networks that can facilitate change at organisational level. They can also become national mediators of institutional change, collaborating with their counterparts in other institutions to develop best practices and ultimately to transform both the organisational culture and the wider institutional context. A focus on getting buy-in by those in senior management through a process of education; enabling them to diagnose bias, to develop tools, to intervene and to evaluate those interventions seems to be particularly helpful [21]. Further research is needed on this.

More research also needs to be done on the impact of leaders' commitment to ending gender inequality. In Ireland, the *National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions* [22] recommended that such demonstrated commitment should be a criterion for appointment to all line management positions in the HEIs. Thus, rather than waiting until such power holders are appointed and then seeking to convince them of the importance of tackling gender inequality, 'chilly' organisational cultures and gendered structures, practices and procedures, the recommendation was that only those who had already demonstrated evidence of leadership in promoting gender equality should be considered for appointment. Van Den Brink and Benschop [23] argue that attempts to promote gender equality will inevitably fail unless they include the neutralisation of those structures which perpetuate it. Peterson and Jordansson [24] highlight attempts to reduce the impact of space and discipline which were seen as important bases of male power. The role of feminist/profeminist male leaders in challenging gender equality deserves further attention.

There has been a good deal of criticism of what has been called the 'leaderist turn' [25,26] in higher education. Nevertheless, if we view leadership as a process of influence [27,28] it is clear that those who occupy positions of formal power in HEIs can use that power to promote or impede the advancement of gender equality. This is particularly important in HEIs where leadership must be exerted subtly since a culture of followership is anathema to academics, many of whom chose this career precisely because of the potential it offers for autonomy. The ways in which those leaders holding power positions can limit the decisions that can be made by other participants [29], use stealth power [30] or 'nudge' power [31] is an important but relatively neglected topic.

Leadership can of course be shown at all levels of the organisation. In Ireland it was shown by Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, an academic in NUI Galway who took and won a landmark gender equality case against her employer in 2014. The Equality Tribunal [32] found that she had been discriminated against in a 2008/09 promotion competition. Of the five other women who were shortlisted but not promoted in that competition, four are taking legal action in the High Court, while the fifth won her case under the Workplace Relations Committee. Micheline Sheehy Skeffington gave the €70,000 she was awarded to these women to enable them to fight their cases. That action captured the public imagination and was one of the elements that led to the establishment of the HEA (2016) *National Review on Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education* [12] Such leadership however exacts a high individual price.

Although much has been written about the impact of neo-liberalism and managerialism on higher education, the ways in which feminists can show leadership at least to some extent, in such contexts, is only beginning to emerge. In this *Special Issue* we have seen evidence of important work on women's voices. Women's effective collusion with patriarchal power [33] is one of the great paradoxes of our time. 'Doing Gender' appropriately [34] has been shown to increase the possibility of 'power to' within patriarchal structures [35]. In male dominated HEIs, the conditions under which symbolic violence exists and is accepted by women merits further attention.

The corporatisation of HEIs which has been seen as a consequence of neo-liberalism has impacted on the leadership role played by Presidents/Rectors/Vice Chancellors in many countries, heightening their external role. It has also been associated with an increase in cross functional senior leadership positions and an increasing gap between such positions and the core activities of teaching, research and service. The consequent alienation of many academics, particularly in Europe, where undergraduate teaching and pastoral care has been devalued and effectively seen as 'academic housework' [36] has been documented. Paradoxically such positions, although seen in some countries [37] as unattractive, are in other countries (such as the UK) earning extremely high salaries in a context where an increasing proportion of front line staff are on part-time or temporary contracts. The phenomenon of women seeing such positions as meaningful but not continuing in them [38] needs to be further explored.

In organisations perceived as exemplifying 'best practice' in gender equality terms, it is possible for local leaders, regardless of the wider national policy context, to increase the proportion of women at (full) professorial level to roughly 30 per cent and the proportion of women in senior management to

roughly 40 per cent [39]. However, this may in fact copper-fasten what purports to be a gender-neutral HEI system [10]. Thus, it is clear that changing the gender profile of those in leadership positions, although symbolically important, is not enough. Indeed, Wroblewski [40] has argued that, rather than seeing increases in the proportion of women in senior leadership positions as a cause of organisational change it should be seen as an effect. Thus, it is in those organisations which have embedded gender into the nature and purpose of the organisation, and whose stakeholders embrace this, that male dominance of senior leadership positions appears problematic. In such contexts the gender profile of leadership positions is not seen as simply a human resource issue. Hence the key question is how such fundamental change can be created. Further research is also needed on intersectional, generational and transgender variation in the performance of leadership.

It is clear that extensive work is still to be done in the area of gender and leadership. This *Special Issue* is an important contribution to that task.

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