# Why are there so few female leaders in higher education: A case of structure or agency?

## Abstract

A significant gender imbalance remains at executive management level within higher education despite a number of initiatives to increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline and ensure they are better prepared for these roles. This article presents findings from a recent study on the appointment of deputy and pro vice chancellors in pre-1992 English universities that provide fresh insights into why this might be the case. These findings challenge the notion of women's missing agency - characterised by a lack of confidence or ambition and a tendency to opt out of applying for the top jobs - as an explanation for their continued under-representation. Rather, they highlight the importance of three structural factors associated with the selection process: mobility and external career capital, conservatism, and homosociability. An approach of 'fixing' the women is therefore unlikely to be sufficient in redressing the current gender imbalance within university executive management teams.

**Introduction and context**

There is a serious gender imbalance at executive management level in UK businesses (Davies, 2015). This is replicated in the education sector where women are under-represented in leadership roles both in schools (Chard, 2013) and universities (Morley, 2013). The lack of inclusivity at the top applies also to ethnicity and disability (ECU, 2015a), though it is the issue of gender that forms the focus for this article.

In higher education, the most recent figures (for the 2013/14 academic year) show that women comprise 45% of academic staff yet account for only 22% of professors, 35% of deputy and pro vice chancellors (PVCs) and 20% of vice chancellors (ECU, 2015a). In the pre-1992 English universities - the focus of my research - the proportion of female PVCs and heads of institution is significantly lower, at 24% and 11% respectively (Shepherd, 2014). Remarkably in eight of these institutions, including some of the country's most prestigious, the vice chancellor and all the PVCs are men (Shepherd, 2015a). This is despite the fact that the majority of higher education students (56%) and staff (54%) are now women (ECU, 2015a; ECU, 2015b).

The UK situation is not unique. Although international data on women's representation in senior higher education leadership roles is somewhat patchy,

itself arguably an indicator of the relative lack of importance attached to the issue (Morley, 2013), the general picture that emerges is one of a dearth of women at the top (Doherty and Manfredi, 2006). Across the 27 countries in the EU, for example, only 15.5% of all higher education institutions and 10% of universities that award PhDs are headed by a woman (European Commission, 2012). Whilst acknowledging that the notion of representation – and what constitutes under- and over-representation – is both complex and contested (Lumby, 2011), this relative dearth of women in senior positions reflects a failure to maximise female talent. This state of affairs is problematic both from a social justice and an organisational perspective given the increasing evidence that the more women executives an organisation has, the better it performs (Noland et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, there is still an element of complacency amongst senior decision makers in higher education.  A number of managers in Deem, Morley and Tlili's study (2005) expressed the view that gender equality has already been accomplished. Moreover, in a recent survey of university governors commissioned by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (hereafter, the Leadership Foundation), equality and diversity 'barely registered as a concern' with only 3% of governors identifying the issue as a key institutional

challenge and only 17% (compared to 42% of staff) believing that it is harder for women than men to succeed in their organisation (LFHE, 2015: 15)

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that progress towards improving women's representation has been limited and slow (Davison and Burke, 2004). Savigny (2014) calculates that at the current growth rate of 0.75% per annum it will take over 100 years for women to achieve equal numbers in the UK professoriate. At executive management level, there has only been a 0.4% annual increase in the proportion of female PVCs in English pre-1992 universities between 2005 and 2013 (Shepherd, 2015b). Furthermore, there is some evidence that the proportion of female vice chancellors may actually be declining (Bebbington, 2012).

In recent years, initiatives such as Athena SWAN (designed to support the advancement of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and the Leadership Foundation's female-only Aurora and Leadership Matters programmes have been introduced to increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline and better prepare them for senior roles. Yet, however many female academic managers emerge and however much they lean in (Sandberg, 2013), they still have to make it through the recruitment and selection process if

they are to secure the top jobs. This process remains a major determinant of the demographic of a university's executive management team and it is thus vital that universities undertake it effectively and equitably. However, my research suggests that this may not be the case in some universities where recent change to recruitment practice is having a detrimental impact on the number of women being appointed (Shepherd, 2015b).

**Methodology**

This article presents selected empirical data from my doctoral study in order to shed new light on the reasons for women's continued under-representation at senior leadership levels in higher education.

This underlying study examines the appointment of PVCs. This generic term is used to denote those predominantly, but not exclusively, academic managers at the second tier of university management: that is, at the level immediately below the vice chancellor or head of institution. It is used to describe all managers in this group, whatever their specific job title. This includes deputy vice chancellors as well as pro vice chancellors even where, as is increasingly the case, the two co-exist with the former holding a distinctive role and status from the latter (Shepherd, 2014). It includes both executive PVC/Deans with faculty or campus

line management responsibilities as well as PVCs with policy oversight for a specific portfolio, such as research or teaching and learning.

The research focus is on English pre-1992 universities, i.e. those institutions that had university status prior to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which brought the former polytechnics into the university sector. Pre-1992 institutions, often referred to as 'old' or 'traditional' universities, are a diverse group that includes Oxford and Cambridge, the large civic universities (such as Birmingham and Sheffield), former colleges of art and technology (such as Loughborough and Surrey), University of London federal colleges (such as UCL and Imperial) and the 1960s 'plate glass' institutions (such as Kent and Warwick). Despite their different histories, with the exception of Oxford and Cambridge, they share similar governance arrangements in the form of a Council, or governing body, to oversee university finances and strategy and a Senate to oversee academic affairs. They are research-intensive institutions that enjoy a relatively privileged status compared to the more teaching-oriented post-1992 universities.

Until recently pre-1992 universities have been regarded as having a less managerial culture than their newer counterparts, with academics arguably more resistant to being managed. However, in an increasingly fast-moving and competitive higher education environment, all vice chancellors are under

pressure to manage their institutions effectively and this necessitates making good PVC appointments. Moreover, according to post holders themselves, the role has become increasingly managerial in nature (Shepherd, 2014). Even so, the majority of PVCs in pre-1992s are still appointed on a fixed-term basis (rather than as a permanent management position, as may be more typical of the newer universities) on the assumption that they will return to their academic job at the end of their term of office – albeit that this is neither an attractive nor a feasible option for many.

Pre-1992s were chosen as the study population because many of these institutions are changing the way they appoint their PVCs, i.e. moving away from a traditional internal secondment model towards one of external open competition - already the norm in post-1992 institutions. The study investigates the nature, drivers and consequences – intended and otherwise - of this change in appointment practice both for the careers of individual managers and for the development of management capacity within the sector (Shepherd, 2015b).

A mixed-methods research design was utilized incorporating three distinct data collection elements. Firstly, a census designed to give a snapshot in time of the demographic and career profile of all PVC post holders in the 45 English pre-1992 universities. This data was collected from publicly available sources, primarily university websites. Secondly, an online survey was undertaken of

third-tier managers, i.e. those academic and professional services managers at the level immediately below PVCs who are not members of the university's executive management team. On the academic side these are usually deans. However, where the dean is also a PVC, third-tier managers are deemed to be those at the next level down the academic hierarchy, i.e. heads of school or department. It is from the ranks of these academic third-tier managers that the vast majority of future PVCs will be drawn since the typical route into the role remains head of department, then dean. On the administrative side, third-tier managers are directors of professional services with a direct report to the registrar. All third-tier managers in pre-1992 universities for whom an email address was available (n=661) were invited to participate in the online survey and 132 complete responses were received, with a 64:36% split between academic and professional services third tier managers. The gender split of respondents was 72:28 male to female, which is the same as that for the third-tier manager population as a whole. The aim of the survey was to generate data on their aspirations with regard to becoming a PVC and their experience of applying for externally advertised PVC posts.

The third, and substantive, data collection phase comprised 73 semi-structured interviews with vice chancellors (19), PVCs appointed by means of external open competition (26), registrars (8) and third-tier managers (17) drawn from

the 30 pre-1992 institutions that had externally advertised at least one PVC post between 1 January 2006 and 31 December 2012. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives from three of the four executive search agencies most active in the higher education market. Women were slightly over-represented at 25%, compared to 24% for the sample population. The inclusion of different categories of research participant from all three top tiers of university management, as well as from executive search agencies, was designed to gain a more rounded perspective on the research phenomenon than has been the case with research to date.

Whilst the aim of this study was not to investigate women's under-representation in PVC roles – and hence this article makes no claims to address the issue in a comprehensive way – it nevertheless produced some interesting, and counter-intuitive, gender-related findings. These data both challenge some commonly expressed ideas relating to women's missing agency and offer alternative explanations for why relatively few female PVCs are being appointed. These are considered via the theoretical lens of structure and agency, whereby an individual's agency, or capacity to act, is assumed to take place within structural contexts that are culturally shaped (Archer, 1996).

**Women's missing agency?**

The individualistic nature of an academic career puts academics under pressure to manage their own career advancement and reinforces the belief that they are personally responsible for making it happen (Coate et al., 2015). As these same researchers note, the premium that academic culture places on individual agency may have the effect of downplaying the role of structural inequalities. The problem of women's under-representation thus becomes that of the women themselves, or rather that of their missing agency.

This missing agency may take the form of a perceived lack of self-confidence or ambition leading women to opt out of applying for senior management positions. Chesterman et al., for example, found that many senior female academics were wary of applying for management roles without specific encouragement or endorsement of their credentials from others and that this reticence, combined with a lack of self-confidence and ambivalence – even resistance - towards these roles, was a key factor explaining 'women's avoidance of senior jobs' (2005: 178).

My own research found little difference between men and women in terms of their aspirations to secure a more senior university management job. Female deans and heads of school are almost as likely as their male colleagues (43%

compared to 45%) to consider applying for a PVC post – the next rung up the management ladder. In fact, a higher proportion of women (29%) than men (22%) say they are *very* likely to apply. Moreover, when it comes to translating aspiration into action there is still relatively little difference between the genders: 14% of female deans and heads of school, compared to 16% of men, had already applied for a PVC job in their own institution.  In contrast, the proportion of male deans and heads of school who had already applied for a PVC role in *another* university is more than double that of their female counterparts (22 versus 9%). This implies that geographical mobility may be more of an issue for women.

At PVC level too, though women are far fewer in number, they are no less likely than men to aspire to the top job. Of the five women I interviewed, two had already applied for a vice chancellor post – unsuccessfully. Both had been told that they were not yet ready to take on the top job, but remained confident about their future career progression and intended to reapply:

'I've had an insight into how a VC works and feel that there's not a bit that's missing. I will definitely be a VC.' (PVC 14)

'I will run an institution myself or some other kind of organisation, not necessarily in HE or in the UK.' (PVC 26)

Whilst these women display a high degree of self-confidence it should be borne in mind that they are part of a select group who have already succeeded in gaining a PVC post via a process of external open competition. As White et al. (2011) observe, it takes courage and resilience for a woman to apply for a leadership post in a managerial academic culture. The PVCs in my study have already 'put their heads above the parapet', as one vice chancellor (VC 10) describes it, and may thus not be typical of the wider female academic manager cohort. For example, in the recent Leadership Foundation survey of alumni from its Top Management Programme (designed for aspiring university leaders), women were more likely than men to cite a lack of confidence as an inhibiting factor on their career progression (Manfredi et al., 2014).

However, the strategic agency demonstrated by the female deans and heads of school as well as these PVCs challenges the notion that women in higher education may be reluctant to apply for more senior management jobs and become involved in the 'competitive, self-promotional behavior traditionally associated with dominant masculinities' (Leonard, 2001: 4).

In contrast to some earlier research findings that women view management roles as unappealing, overly demanding or simply not do-able (Chesterman et

al., 2005) most of the PVCs I interviewed – men and women - were relishing the job and see a management career as an attractive option. Part of the appeal is said to be the opportunity to take decisions and make a difference and, like the female academic managers in O'Connor's (2015) study of Irish universities, these women showed little ambivalence towards assuming positional power.

Of course, a senior management job is not for everyone but gender differences in this regard are not pronounced. Female deans and heads of school are only slightly more likely to choose to opt out of applying for a PVC role than men (52% compared to 47%), typically to re-focus on their academic work. The decision to dismiss senior management as a career option can itself be a positive choice, or assertion of agency. However, for some women it may also reflect a self-preservation strategy, an attempt to avoid the 'cruel optimism' of aspiring to something they believe they are statistically unlikely to achieve (Morley, 2014: 120): a belief that appears to have some empirical foundation, as the following section shows.

## Structural issues

Neither aspiration nor agency (in the form of submitting an application) are guarantees of success in securing a senior management job. Whilst this is true

for both men and women, it would appear that the latter are at a particular disadvantage. Recent research commissioned by the Leadership Foundation found that female alumni of its Top Management Programme who subsequently applied for a more senior management role were more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to have been *un*successful: 21.6% compared to only 8.5% for men (Manfredi et al., 2014). This is a real concern from an equity perspective since, unless women account for a high proportion of new appointments, the overall gender imbalance at senior leadership levels will fail to improve. It may even worsen.

Although a desire to secure the best candidates was the main driver of change, a number of vice chancellors and other university managers in my study expected the introduction of external open competition for PVC posts to lead to more women getting the jobs. However, the reverse has been the case: only 15% of PVCs appointed by external competition are women compared to 28% via an internal-only appointment process. This has implications for the gender profile not only of the PVC cohort but also that of vice chancellors since PVCs form the main recruitment pool for future university leaders.

The sections highlights three structural impediments that help explain this mismatch between expectation and reality in terms of the impact of external open competition on the numbers of female PVCs being appointed.

*Geographical mobility and external career capital*

Although an external open competition recruitment process does not necessarily lead to the appointment of someone from outside the institution (34% of PVCs appointed via external competition were internal candidates), a desire to bring in an external candidate was a key driver of change for many of the vice chancellors in my study. External appointees are seen as bringing fresh ideas and perspectives as well as unencumbered from vested interests and hence better placed to take forward a change agenda. These attitudes and assumptions place a premium on external, as opposed to internal, career capital (Floyd and Dimmock, 2011). The first relates to knowledge accumulated in one's own institution and the second to that gained elsewhere.

The fact that external career capital has become increasingly important in relation to PVC appointments has implications in terms of equity. Not all aspiring PVCs are able to move institutions to grow their career capital and/or obtain a more senior post. Although this is not a new problem, it is one which is

becoming more pertinent given both the increased expectation that PVCs will have worked in more than one university and the reduced opportunity for promotion within one's own institution when posts are externally advertised.

Aspiring managers who are not geographically mobile may be disadvantaged and women may be more affected than men, as evidenced by the fact that female deans and heads of school are less likely than their male counterparts to have applied for a PVC job in another university. This resonates with previous research which has shown that women may be less mobile in their careers (Chesterman et al., 2005) and more constrained in their career advancement by 'limited opportunities to change employer' (Manfredi et al., 2014: 13).

*Conservatism and risk*
Universities tend to be conservative and risk-averse organisations. These two cultural traits also characterise the approach of many pre-1992 institutions to the recruitment and selection of their PVCs. Ironically perhaps, these conservative tendencies are exacerbated by the highly competitive and challenging environment in which universities are now operating and the pressure they are under to manage themselves effectively. As already noted, the PVC role is more managerial and demanding than hitherto and this has

raised the stakes with regard to making appointments. As the perceived cost of a bad appointment increases, so the avoidance of risk becomes even more of a concern. This is particularly true when executive search agencies are utilised, given the expense incurred and the potential reputational fallout of a failed appointment.

In order to limit the chances of selecting the wrong candidate, appointment panels appear to be using experience as their main indicator of quality. Since there is no one better able to demonstrate experience than an individual already undertaking the role, it follows that existing PVCs become the prime candidates.

'You increasingly have to do the job before you get it.' (PVC 10)

Although the prioritisation of experience makes sense in the light of vice chancellors' stated desire for PVCs who can hit the ground running , it precludes serious consideration of a more diverse candidate pool, placing non-standard candidates at a disadvantage. Moreover, it fails to take into account a candidate's potential. Thus, a talented but less experienced female candidate may be deemed too high risk.

This conservative and risk-averse approach to recruitment and selection helps explain why, despite the fact that the opening up of PVC posts to external competition and the use of executive search agencies has widened the pool of potential applicants, the outcome has not been greater diversity in the profile of the people being appointed. Rather, it has resulted in the selection of safer, more experienced candidates and the recirculation of existing PVCs as part of a self-perpetuating, predominantly male, hierarchy.

*Homosociabilty*

My study found that vice chancellors are the key decision makers with regard to PVC appointments and 'call the shots' (PVC 7) both with regard to the choice of recruitment method and the selection decision:

> 'No candidate will be appointed without the agreement of the VC.' (VC 9)

> 'The chief executive needs to have the team he wants. The VC can ultimately do what they like.' (VC 11)

Although university governors have to formally approve these appointments, in general they appear willing to accede to the wishes of their vice chancellor.

Indeed, some vice chancellors made it very clear from the outset that they expected the governors to go along with their choice of candidate.

Whilst it is understandable that vice chancellors would wish to choose members of their own executive team, this has not been conducive to diversity. Academic managers who have been through the appointment process spoke of how they became aware of the requirement for a  good fit with the existing executive team, leading to the appointment of 'more of the same':

> 'There's not a receptiveness to consider non-standard candidates brought forward by executive search agencies. People tend to recruit those made in their own self-image.' (PVC 25)

These findings are suggestive of homosociability, or 'the tendency to select people just like oneself', that was also found to be symptomatic of the principal selection process in Australia (Blackmore et al., 2006: 297) and Ireland (Grummell et al., 2009). They support the contention that familiarity exerts a powerful influence over who gets appointed or promoted (Harley, 2003), a situation that disadvantages 'outsiders' to the dominant group who diverge from the stereotypical leadership ideal (Coleman, 2012). It has also been argued that

some differences matter more than others, for example where they are perceived as problematic by the majority group, and that prejudice may be greater against those with observable difference, such as ethnicity and gender (Lumby, 2006).

The tendency for organisations to select people who are similar to the leaders they are replacing has been described as a form of cloning – and one that perpetuates unequal representation (Gronn and Lacey, 2006). It also runs the risk of 'group think' (Hambrick and Mason, 1984) and a lack of appropriate challenge, neither of which is conducive to the effective running of a university. On the contrary, there is a strong business case for a heterogeneous executive management team that reflects a diversity of backgrounds and talents.

## Conclusion

Strategic agency is required if individuals are to prosper in the academic game (Acker, 2010) and women have sometimes been seen as deficient in this regard, lacking in the necessary confidence and skills of self-promotion. Alternatively, it has been argued that they are choosing to opt of senior management positions because they deem them unattractive and/or impossibly demanding. Whilst this is undoubtedly true for many academics of both

genders, findings from my study of the appointment of PVCs show that female academic managers are no less ambitious or likely to apply for a more senior management role than their male counterparts. This implies that women's missing agency is not in itself an adequate explanation for their continued under-representation at the top of higher education. Instead, talented and ambitious women may be disadvantaged by a number of structural factors associated with the recruitment and selection process for senior posts, including lack of external career capital, conservatism and homosociability.

This implies that efforts to 'fix' the women, for example female-only development programmes like Aurora and Leadership Matters, are unlikely to be sufficient to achieve gender equality. Rather, a mix of change interventions may be required that also seek to 'fix' the organisation, i.e. in terms of systemic and procedural changes. More importantly, perhaps, the micro-politics and cultural assumptions that underpin these practices and procedures – for example, in relation to recruitment and selection - also need to be acknowledged and addressed.

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