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Fractured but not broken The continued gender gap in senior administrative positions

Introduction

Much has been written about the glass ceiling and pay differentials in higher and further education (HE, FE) for women academics (McTavish and Miller 2009, Rees 2007) but very little about discrepancies for women 'professional managers' within UK higher education. Professional managers as a term needs to be defined as universities call their generalist administrative/management staff by a variety of titles, eg academic-related, professional services, support, administrators, managers etc. In this paper the term 'professional manager' is used as in Whitchurch (2007) to capture the professionalism of staff undertaking generalist roles, such as in student services or departmental/faculty management.

Background

Equality for women (and men) was enshrined in the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (Rees 2007). Legislatively this has meant that women have been treated in the same as men, and post-feminist theory suggests that equality battles have been won and that women and men now have equal opportunities.

However, when looking into the attainment of women in HE, the concept of equal opportunities seems to come into question. Female staff have outnumbered male staff in universities for at least 16 years in higher education management (Singh 2002). However, there is still an unbalanced gender profile at senior, ie above G9 (spine point > 51 on the new single pay framework [UCU 2004]), or at professorial level. If for professional managers at levels below that of Grade 10 women outweigh men by on average 62% (Lipsett 2009) why at levels at G10 and above do women represent on average only 30% of staff?

This situation can be compared with that of our academic colleagues. Women make up 43.3% of lecturers and senior lecturers but only 18.7% of professors (see figure 1). It is acknowledged that pay acts as quantitative evidence of gender discrimination and this shows that women professors in 2007-08 were still paid 13.9% less than their male colleagues (Lipsett 2009). Research by Smith (2009) at a post-1992 university shows that women professional managers were paid on average 22% less than men and that the size of the gap seems to rise the higher the grade.

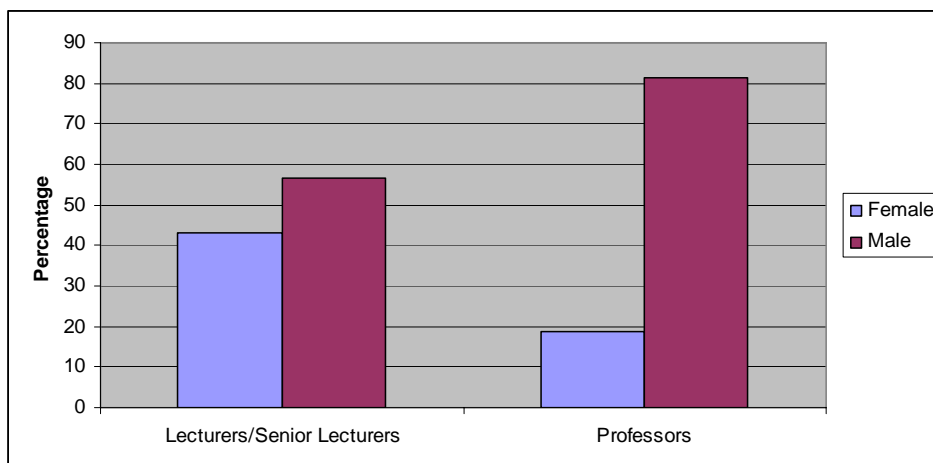


Figure 1. Percentage of male and female staff at varying grades.

For this paper I have carried out desk research looking at universities' annual monitoring reports (The Open University, Cranfield [2009], Edinburgh [2009] and Brighton [2009] Universities) in order to find the difference in the percentage of women at the varying pay grades in the professional manager grades of 6 to 9 and above (spine points 23 to 51). I hope that this research will add to the debate on gender inequality for professional management staff in universities in the UK.

However, it must be pointed out at this point that gender is only one aspect of inequality that will be present within organisations and that by focusing on this category I have simplified the interwoven complexities of class, race, disability and sexuality (Acker 2006). Research by Fenton et al (2000) found that academic women in all ethnic categories were more likely than men to be employed on fixed-term contracts; non-white women were less well placed than either white women or non-white men. In all age groups fewer non-white British staff have been promoted than white British staff.

Results

To allow comparison of the universities' pay scales I have where necessary converted individual grades and brought them in line with the national single pay spine that came into force in 2004 (UCU 2004).

Table 1 shows the grades, spine points and the salary bands for ARS G6 to G10+.

Grade	Spine Point*	Salary (£)
6	23-29	24,273-28,983
7	30-36	29,853-35,646
8	37-43	36,715-43,840
9	45-49	45,510-52,347
10	No agreed scales but ~ £60k+	

Table 1. HEI pay framework.

Figure 2 shows the averaged comparative data for the universities. The dramatic decrease in female staff numbers at senior grades can be clearly seen.

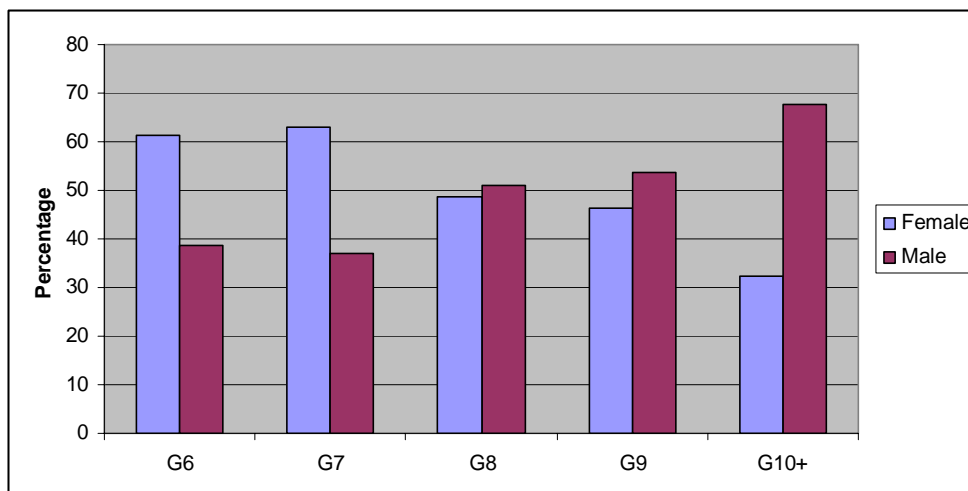


Figure 2. Averaged female and male ARS ratios across the four HEIs.

Figure 3 shows The Open University's data across a number of years which indicates the same pattern as the averaged data. This clearly demonstrates that the ratio of female to male staff suddenly switches at G10 and above when at all grades from G6 to G9 female staff have outnumbered male staff.

From 2005 to 2009 there was only a 7% increase in female staff at G10+. This equates well with the 6% growth in FE Principals from 2003 to 2008. However, our academic colleagues at vice-chancellor level have some way to go with only 1.2% increase over the same period (figure 4).

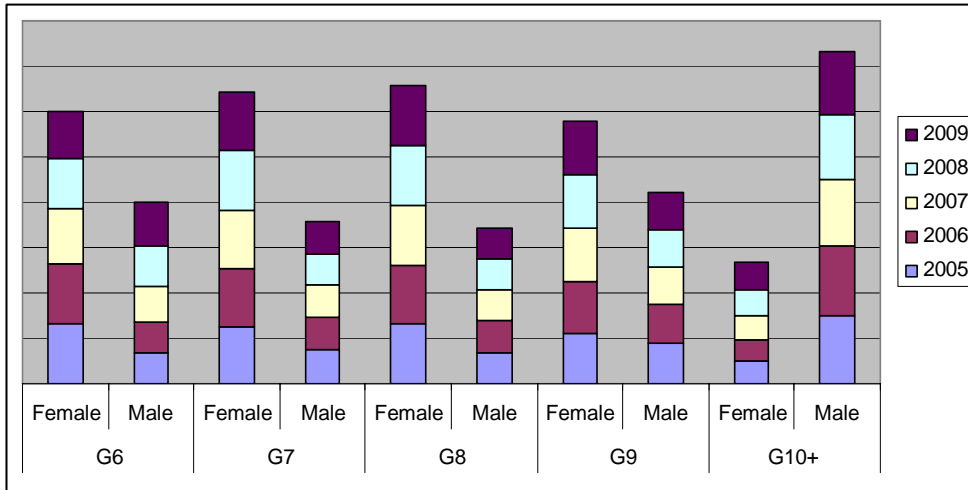


Figure 3. The Open University female to male ARS ratios.

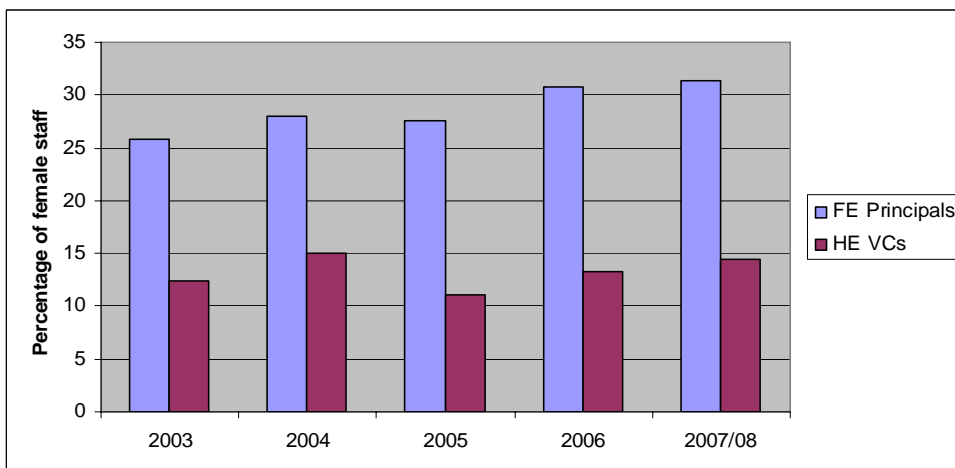


Figure 4. Percentage of female VCs/Principals in the UK over the last five years (EHRC 2008).

Discussion

Policy drivers for equality

In the UK there is a statutory gender duty for public authorities, which includes HEIs, as set out in the Equality Act 2006 (and subsumed in the Equality Bill published in April 2009 due to come into force in the autumn of 2010: [http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality_bill.aspx]). One of the main provisions of this act is to:

“...create a duty on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity between women and men ('the gender duty'), and prohibit sex discrimination and harassment in the exercise of public functions.”

In some European countries, following the failure of long-standing equality legislation to make an impact on HEIs, there has been an introduction of state-driven interventionist approaches to gender equality, with quotas and targets becoming important parts of the strategies. In Sweden the 1994 Higher Education Act states that 'every university must promote equality ... in appointing staff at all levels.' In Norway the Higher Education Act 1995 provides targets to improve women's representation in top jobs.

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The Netherlands has also adopted targets by introducing an act promoting proportional representation of women in education management across all levels in the sector (Ledwith and Manfredi 2000). Acker (2006) notes that change efforts that have been supported by a combination of social pressure and legislation seem to be more successful, especially when non-compliance involves a threat of sanctions.

In the UK, Goode and Bagilhole (1998) note that a report on equality by The Hansard Society Commission in 1990 reported that the UK government hoped that the sheer numbers of women in junior and middle-management positions in the work force would bring changes at senior levels. The progress report in 1995 commented that 'generational change does not appear to have done the trick and the evidence suggests that waiting for it to do so may well take a long time'. There seems to be no will to change legislation in the UK to bring into force targets and proportional representation between the sexes for employers to work towards, and legislation continues to put the onus on employers and institutions to work within a decentralised, voluntary system in order to engender equality (Ledwith and Manfredi 2000). However, the new Equality Bill does propose to:

"...expand the way positive action can be used so that employers can pick someone for a job from an underrepresented group when they have the choice between two or more candidates who are equally suitable, provided they do not have a general policy of doing so in every case."

How this will work in practice with the threat of equality tribunals we will have to wait and see.

It seems that in the thirteen years since the Hansard report things have changed little in HE, given the continuing majority of women in junior and middle-management posts. Eighteen universities, including The Open University (out of a total of 160 HEIs in the UK) are members of Opportunity Now, 'a membership organisation for employers who are committed to creating an inclusive workplace for women' (<http://www.opportunitynow.org.uk>). However, even The Open University which gained a Gold Standard award for gender equality commitment and action still shows a lack of gender equality in G10+ posts.

Although there has been some good work reported at individual institutions to support women in gaining senior management posts, such as at LSE (<http://www.lse.ac.uk>), Birmingham City (<http://www.bcu.ac.uk>) and in Wales (<http://www.ecu.ac.uk>), it is still apparent that some women and some 'senior managers' believe that institutions are gender neutral (Morley 2000), that equal opportunities ensure equality of opportunity and that it is 'just a matter of time' before women equal men in senior management. Considering that women have outnumbered men in HE for twenty years and that there has been so little change in the past five years, should we still be waiting to 'grow into' senior management with best estimates showing that equality may be gained in another eleven years?

Interestingly, nowhere in the above reports is there a discussion of power or gender relations in organisations. Instead, problems of gender discrimination are rendered into 'problems' with women, leading to institutional 'action plans' to help women comply with existing institutional requirements, rather than the organisations examining how they might change to be better suited to the complexities of women's lives (Ledwith and Manfredi 2000).

For example, most HEIs' action plans on gender equality are concerned with equitable treatment in recruitment and promotion processes. All HEIs will have good practice recruitment processes that lead to perceived equitable treatment of men and women, such as gender-balanced interview panels, ensuring that there is a member of the panel external to the appointing unit, short-listing not being in the hands of one person etc. HEIs should be held up as excellent examples in fair recruitment processes as there is evidence from the OU that women who do apply for senior jobs are more successful in gaining these posts than are their male counterparts. However, this in itself can be used as evidence that there is something more fundamental in organisations' gender equality procedures because the question that needs answering is why more women do not apply.

Gendered organisations

Organisations have structural and organisational norms that are gendered. These might include lack of job sharing at senior grades, and terms and conditions of employment that state there are no set working hours but in reality mean there is a lack of flexibility in work place and hours (Martin 2003, Priola 2007). This arises from UK culture being normalised to a heterosexual masculine structure of work versus family, for example in requiring at least eight hours of work per day away from home, arriving on time, total attention to the work and the requirement to work 'overtime' as and when required (Acker 2006, Morley 2000).

Universities promote themselves as liberal meritocratic institutions, with recruitment and promotion based upon merit. Figures 1-4 show that with seniority the gender balance moves from predominantly female to predominantly male. There is obviously a mismatch between how institutions *believe* they are acting and how they are in fact acting, as the evidence across HE shows. Is this because HEIs believe themselves to be gender neutral, when research (Acker 1990) points to the fact that all institutions are gendered and that the dominant gender has been normalised as masculine (Priola 2007) as mentioned above? The fact that the accepted cultural norms for positions of seniority favour men means that the institution itself is not gender neutral because it is structurally gendered *for* men.

For example, organisations are seen as rational, analytical, non-emotional and often bureaucratic – which equates with male. There still seems to be an ingrained 'manager means man' mental model which decades of equality bills cannot eradicate.

It can be argued that HE organisations' structures are gendered in two interacting processes (Acker 1990):

Divisions along lines of gender

- Of work – think secretary, think female; think part-time, think female.
- Tolerance of gendered behaviour – women being asked to take minutes of meetings, or make the coffee, or sort out an administrative problem.
- The feminisation of jobs – HE used to be dominated by men and on a par with the civil service but the increase in women in HE management has devalued HE professional management as a career.
- Power – that of the family, the state and the market. Think of the power that the state holds over women. The state is complicit in the view that women are care-givers by ensuring that only they have (relatively) long and protected maternity leave compared with men's paternity leave. Women may therefore have to choose between business and family (Ledwith and Manfredi 2000).

Divisions along lines of organisational procedures

- Employment contracts – the requirement to be in the office between set hours, and therefore away from the home, and the requirement to work mostly at the office.
- Managerial expectations – to work long hours to 'get the job done', being on-call seven days a week and lack of flexibility in working patterns.
- Job roles – there is a requirement in HE to evaluate roles (not people) when grading new jobs. This could be seen to be a positive move for gender equality in that there cannot be any primary gender discrimination. However, job roles are themselves gendered – those that are seen to need people 'committed' to full-time paid employment with responsibility and authority, and those that are 'appropriate' for people who are not fully committed, ie. mothers (or fathers) wishing to work part-time to balance family and work life.

The fact that HEIs show gender inequality should come as no surprise, as the HE sector forms part of wider society where gender inequality is widespread. For example, women hold only 11% of directorships in FTSE 100 companies, only 19.5% of Members of Parliament are women (EHRC 2008) and on average women's salaries are 12% lower than men's (Lipsett 2009).

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Pritchard (2007) argues that possible reasons for gender inequality for academic staff include the fact that men make the rules (and feminists can only challenge them). We can extrapolate that for professional managers it is still men in power who make the rules of the institution and that individual women challenge them at different times. But, if the institution and therefore senior management do not recognise that the institution and indeed jobs are in themselves not gender neutral, then there will not be the willingness to provide positive gender actions to ensure this inequality is quickly brought to a close.

Practising gender

We know that individual gender discrimination within organisations exists, although thanks to decades of legislation and human resources policy and practice discrimination is not now (generally) of a primary order – that is, it is not an accepted normative behaviour to display discrimination against individuals or groups based on being 'other' than the dominant culture.

However, if individuals do display secondary discrimination it is often based on non-cognitive processes. If individuals were asked to consciously reflect upon the implications of such behaviour they would argue that it was non-gendered (Reskin 2000, Mathieu 2009). To move past this the goal of the organisation must be to understand the gender dynamics practised by people in powerful positions, including the way in which these practices affect workers' lives.

This has been conceptualised as the micropolitics of the organisation (Morley 2000) – that is the way in which individuals speak, interact, influence, network and form coalitions in gendered ways. It involves rumour, gossip, sarcasm, humour and throw-away remarks. Micropolitics provides an explanation for how patriarchal power is exercised rather than simply possessed.

The main area of concern around individuals practising gender is in non-conscious cognitive processes, eg in meetings the flow of talk, interruptions, turn-taking, setting a topic of conversation. Research shows that men dominate meetings, talk over female colleagues and take their ideas and rephrase them as their own. Other men collude in this behaviour by not noticing or not pointing out exclusive behaviour for fear of being out of the 'club'. Broadbridge and Hearn (2008) argue that management often involves homosocial practices, with men's preference for other men and men's company and the use of masculine models, stereotypes and symbols in management which exclude women. Such experiences give a message to women about their importance; that is, men's failure to treat women as if they are important tells women they are unimportant.

It is this non-conscious non-reflexive practising of gender discrimination that is rarely even recognised, let alone condemned. Individuals have different stocks of knowledge: the espoused theory is context-free, cultural and appropriate, so that when someone is explicitly asked a question related to gender the answer will be whatever is culturally appropriate. However, there is also another stock of knowledge, theory in use, that is related to context and is non-conscious. It is this stock of knowledge that ensures the continuation of gender inequality as it is opaque to individuals (Mathieu 2009). Others may notice this difference between saying and doing (Martin 2003) and individuals need to be challenged without fear of repercussions if we are to move beyond our current mental models of gender.

Action

People in key positions have two options: to lead by example or continue to deny the problem of gender discrimination. However, denial does not erase the harm women experience from being excluded by men, making them feel out of place, or requiring them to act like men. The first action to be taken is for HEIs to admit that they are not gender neutral. Once this has been accomplished then work can start on changing the normative structure around working practices that inherently disadvantage women.

For example, the concept of gender mainstreaming moves beyond a concern with statistics and processes to the examination of the gendering of the institution itself. This move challenges ideas about the gender neutrality of the social construction of merit (Rees 2007). HEIs have completed some work around gender mainstreaming which tries to integrate gender equality

- do not apply for employment or promotion,
- are not recruited or promoted, or are at a lower rate, and
- are concentrated in particular types of contract, grades, departments.

Most HEIs' action plans on gender discrimination tell this story and it is one that has not changed over many years. This is that women are still concentrated in lower grades and in particular departments and on low-paid part-time contracts. This is seen by organisations as an issue that has been tackled in the past by ensuring that recruitment practices are equal and that promotion is transparent. However, because HEIs have not admitted that these processes in themselves have been normalised to the male culture women will still continue to battle for equality. It is unlikely in any HEI that primary discrimination occurs in recruitment or promotion panels but it is the institutional norms that discriminate.

Although many researchers in this area would suggest that practical action to encourage women into more senior positions is only a temporary measure and that what is ultimately needed is the deconstruction of the normative culture, I believe that to break the glass ceiling in the not-too-distant future we do need to start by providing just such relief. To start the process of ensuring that more professional management women move to G10 and senior roles within the sector, HEIs could:

Increase flexibility of working: universities are still quite conservative in their employment practices and generally demand that non-academic staff be based in the office on a 9 to 5 model. We need to move our working practices in line with some of the corporate organisations such as BT, Vodafone and BAA that have embraced technology to ensure that women (and men) can work more flexibly to allow for a better work-life balance. This may include for example compressed weekly working hours and increased home working opportunities.

Increase senior part-time roles: currently the normative model is that senior management roles can only be carried out by full-time – therefore fully committed to business – contracts. Yes, it may require additional work to have senior management job share roles but this can be organised to the benefit of the organisation. As long as part-time roles are scarce at senior management level women will have to continue to make the choice between family and work.

Discard the long hours culture: as long as it is the norm for senior management to work long hours and be on-call 24/7 women will choose not to apply for these positions. Senior management can effect change. Just because this is how it has always been done does not mean it is the best (or healthiest) way for senior managers to operate.

Ensure that G9 women are mentored/coached: evidence from the latest research from McTavish and Miller (2009) shows that female academics were twice as likely to apply for promotion if encouraged to do so by their line manager. One can extrapolate that this would also hold true for professional managers. Therefore, this points to one way of ensuring that women are treated differently from men in the institution in order to gain equality.

Conclusion

The above discussion may leave us feeling disheartened. However, as many HEIs operate on a devolved management model it may be easier for many of us to start to chip away at the normalised working practices that dominate. Mentoring and coaching are starting to be 'on-trend' and we should make the most of this by identifying talented women and encouraging them to utilise this resource. Many of us will be in a position to challenge human resources practices in our faculties or schools and we could start by increasing the number of true job-share roles. Perhaps this concerted bottom-up approach will catch the eye of the men and they will start to realise that they are not taking full advantage of women's multitude of talents.

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