Breaking the Barriers to women achieving seniority in Universities

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Abstract

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A major paradox has developed in universities in Europe and elsewhere. While participation rates of female undergraduates have increased significantly, there has not been a commensurate increase in professorial and senior management positions.

This paper reports on the first phase of a multi-country study – of the Women in Higher Education Management (WHEM) network – that examines barriers to participation of women in senior positions. It examines the literature on women as outsiders in management, and analyses and compares the trends in women’s representation in HE management in each country.

It concludes that this under-representation is consistent across the countries studied and outlines strategies to address the issue.
Breaking the Barriers to women achieving seniority in Universities

Introduction

A major paradox has developed in universities in Europe and elsewhere. While participation rates of female undergraduates have increased significantly over a good many years, there has not been a commensurate increase in professorial and senior management positions, which should be expected. In the countries studied the participation rates of women undergraduates have increased significantly in the last two decades: participation is high in humanities and social sciences, but has also increased in business and some sciences, although in engineering and some physical sciences women are still markedly underrepresented as undergraduates. Women’s participation in postgraduate research although lower than at undergraduate level is also high: in Europe in 2003 59 per cent of PhD graduates were women (OECD, 2006, p.20). But again this varies considerably by discipline and in South Africa more males than females undertake PhDs. However, in academia the participation of women sharply decreases once they reach associate professor and full professor level, and decreases even further in senior management. This paradox requires investigation to address the “ongoing wastage of management and leadership talent which arises from and is perpetuated by the current under-representation of women at senior levels” (Noble & Moore, 2006, p.599; see also Harcar 2007).

The participating countries in this study are Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Portugal, South Africa, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.* It is important to acknowledge that the historical and cultural contexts of women’s participation in higher education in the countries has been different. In Portugal, for example, participation rates in higher education were low until the 1980s, and in that country and Turkey – which now has 93 HE institutions - there has been considerable growth in private universities in the last decade. However, it is also significant that while participation of women as undergraduates in the countries studied was now relatively high, they all still tended to be underrepresented in some disciplines such as engineering and the hard sciences.

The main entry point into an academic career in several countries is at lecturer level. This requires at least a first degree, but now increasingly a PhD. However, in Portugal and Ireland it is possible to be appointed as a trainee assistant/teaching assistant (respectively) while doing a PhD. (Indeed in particular disciplines in Humanities in Ireland, such is the demand for jobs that teaching assistants typically have Ph.Ds, experience of teaching and at least one publication). Routinely, in the UK, Ireland and Australia candidates for lectureships - and even for Assistant/Junior Lecturerships in the Humanities and the Social Sciences in Ireland - need PhDs and international publications under their belt, and in New Zealand candidates require PhDs except in some professional areas. It also is noted that while there is increasing feminisation of academia in most countries in this study, there is horizontal and vertical segregation (de Lourdes Machado et.al. 2007; Ozkanli 2007). In some countries academic positions are highly contested – UK, Australia, and New Zealand and in Ireland, especially in Humanities and Social Science, at Lecturer and Junior /Assistant Lecturer level – but in Turkey and Portugal men tend to seek jobs outside academia and women take their place in the queue (Ozbilgin and Healy, 2004, p.361; de Lourdes Machado et.al. 2007). However, most women are in education, arts, humanities, social sciences and life sciences, whereas the majority of men are in Physical Science, Engineering and Technology (SET). Also, even in the disciplines where women are more represented they are concentrated at the bottom of the academic hierarchy.
This segregation has an impact on the career advancement of female academics and is most clearly evident in their low representation at professorial level. Table 1 below demonstrates the continuing under representation of women in senior academia. The glass ceiling for female academics in the countries studied appears to be between senior/assistant lecturer and associate professor - but in Ireland it is between Senior Lecturer and Lecturer -where the representation of female academics decreases significantly.

**TABLE 1**

**Percentage of female professors 2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Full Professor</th>
<th>Associate Professor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland*</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Including the 7 universities supported by the State (and excluding the St Patricks Catholic University, Maynooth; the Colleges of Education; NCAD and RSCI and the Institutes of Technology)

** Statistics not available

The research found that the proportion of women who were at professorial level varied in the seven countries studied but were generally low for full professors - except for Turkey where 27 per cent of full professors were women - with Ireland having the lowest proportion of women at both levels. These findings are consistent with those of the OECD (2006) that women in the EU make up less than 20 per cent of senior academic staff in most countries.

The continuing under representation of women in the professoriate is important to this study, as the professoriate provides the recruitment pool for women for senior management. Because the recruitment pool is inadequate universities will continue to argue that there are simply not sufficient eligible women for these positions.

An analysis of not only gender but also discipline at professorial level may be important to this study. Investigators agree that the nature of scholarship in disciplines can differ. Academics in SET are more likely to reach the top because they have access to considerably more resources in these disciplines and hence international collaboration is facilitated. Multi authoring and the use of citation indices which serve these disciplines with their focus on refereed journal articles are also arguably important. In other words, hard sciences can build large research networks and build advantage because they attract money.

Being promoted or appointed to professorial positions is still an important issue for female academics and creates a barrier to their further advancement. In the UK, for example, there is often mobility only within a small group of elite institutions. Women therefore often move from old to new universities in order to gain promotion, but then find it difficult to gain further promotion back into old universities. In Portugal there is also a trend for academics to move to newer universities or polytechnics to gain promotion.
Background and literature review

This paper argues that women remain outsiders in University leadership and management. The literature indicates that discipline base, career mobility, other care responsibilities, experience outside academia, the process of appointment to senior management, and gender stereotyping may impact on the chances of women becoming senior university managers (Huisu 2000, Ozkanli and Korkmaz 2000, Carrington and Pratt 2003, Neale & White 2004, van den Brink & Brouns 2005, Bagilhole & White 2005, Rees 2005, Thanacoody et.al. 2006, OECD 2006, and Woodward 2007). Schein (2007, p.7) acknowledges that: “Barriers to women in management exist globally and the higher the organisational level, the more glaring the gender gap”. She adds that a deep-seated culture of ‘think manager, think male’ is a factor in women’s poor performance in management (see also Mihail 2006).

The context in which the few women that are appointed to senior management roles is also important to investigate. Ryan & Haslam (2004) argue that simply giving women the opportunity to be leaders is not the same as “enacting equal opportunity if these positions do not carry the same chance of success”. Are women then appointed to problematic leadership roles? The idea that has been suggested of more a ‘glass cliff” than a ‘glass ceiling’ for them. And does the designation of a leadership role change, perhaps ever so subtly, if a woman is appointed to the position (Neale & White 2004)?

Moreover, the presence of a minority of women in senior management does not necessarily challenge the structures and processes in HE where the subordinate position of women is well documented and officially recognised (Harley 2003). While women try to navigate new ways of managing in a culture shaped by a narrow group of men (Bagilhole & White 2005), they will only experience rewarding careers by challenging these structures and processes to make universities meritocratic and more compatible with their talents and aspirations (Rees 2005). As Wilson-Kovacs (2006, p. 683) asserts, the greatest challenge “may reside in the fabric of the everyday work culture itself, whose under-radar practices undermine the very expectations it holds of women professionals”.

Bagilhole and White in 2004 undertook a web-based survey of all senior managers in UK and Australian universities. While the percentage of women at Vice-Chancellor (VC) and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) level was higher in Australia than the UK (26% and 18% in compared to 8% and 6%), the worrying trend was that women were only between a quarter and one-fifth of PVCs, Deans and Deputy-Deans, an important pool from which VCs and DVCs are recruited. Moreover, women were more likely to attain senior management positions in new than ‘old’ (most prestigious) universities, and men in science, engineering and technology disciplines predominated as VCs in both countries (Bagilhole & White 2005).

Given the lack of transparency in recruitment and selection processes (Wyn 1997, Bagilhole 2002, Reay 2000, Kloot 2004, O’Meara & Petzell 2005), senior women academics often lack the knowledge to successfully compete for senior management positions. Bagilhole and White therefore conducted qualitative research with current and former VCs, senior managers and recruitment firms to identify skill requirements for effective leadership and management. This research indicated gender is an issue in HE leadership, in recruitment and selection, exclusion from male camaraderie, and preference for transformational leadership.
**Approach**

Bagilhole and White’s research forms the basis for the wider research project involving the seven countries listed above, each representing diverse models of HE. Australia and New Zealand are based on the British model, Turkish universities developed from the reforms introduced by Ataturk in the 1920s, while Portugal was one of the first countries to have universities and HE expanded rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s.

The paper reports on the first stage of this research to analyse the representation of women as senior academics and senior managers. It defines senior managers as: VCs, Rectors, Presidents, Vice Rectors/DVCs, Pro Rectors/PVCs, Executive Directors (for example Finance, HR). Deans and Deputy Deans are included in the study because they form the recruitment pool for senior managers. The next stage will involve semi-structured interviews with a sample of senior managers in each country to gain further insight into the barriers to women achieving seniority in universities.

The data analysed was: percentage of women professors, percentage of women at each level in senior management, percentage of women in senior management in old versus new universities (where relevant), and discipline of male VCs, Rectors and Presidents.

**Findings**

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Rector/VC</th>
<th>Vice Rector/DVC</th>
<th>PVC/Pro-Rector</th>
<th>Dean</th>
<th>Executive Director</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* focussing on the 7 Irish Universities funded by the state only

The research found that women’s participation in senior management was low and consistent across most countries, but with some important variations. Women were generally poorly represented at Rector/VC level, with representation increasing at Vice Rector/DVC level. But the representation of women Deans was generally low- except in Portugal. It was especially low in Ireland where there were eight times more academic men than academic women at Dean level or above. Non-academic women rather than academic women are relatively well represented at Vice President level in Ireland and as Executive Directors in New Zealand, which suggests that such non-academic women may be used to advance a managerialist culture and/or are considered to be more ‘acceptable’ than academic women.
It was considered that several factors may contribute to continued low participation of women as senior academics. One is the link between low participation rates of women as professors and senior managers. For example, do women make informed choices about not seeking senior management positions. Research with male Deans found that they too were reluctant to take on these positions, but were coerced into Deanships because no-one else wanted them (Carvalho 2006). Therefore, the study needs to explore in stage two whether or not women are making informed choices, or are they being kept out of these positions by other considerations such as their chosen discipline and the difficulty of producing large quantities of internationally recognised research.

Another factor to be explored is role conflict and its impact on women’s representation in senior management. Certainly in Turkey this is an issue (Ozkanli and White forthcoming), and to some extent in the UK (Bagilhole 2002). It could be, as Carrington and Pratt (2003, p.7-8) suggest, that ‘the complex interplay between gender divisions in the home and the workplace’ impact on women with family responsibilities. And Bickley et.al’s (2007) study of women across several countries confirms this. However, in Australia it has been established that discrimination rather than family responsibilities negatively impacts on the careers of female academics (Ozkanli and White forthcoming).

One critical factor is the intersection of discipline and gender. These interact in a complex way in their impact on career progression. For example, women in the arts may experience a double disadvantage in their career progression, finding it more difficult to access funding to form international collaborations and to attract the kind of large funding that would enable them to produce multiply authored internationally recognised research. And while the paper earlier asserted that disciplines such as science, engineering and technology, in which male academics predominate, enhance the chance of them being promoted to professorial level and senior management, women in engineering are in fact disadvantaged in the labour market and especially in academia (see Bagilhole 2002).

A further factor is the divide between old and new universities. It was agreed that traditions of HE do not change easily. Investigators questioned whether or not a more diversified HE system impacted on gender and higher education management. The old universities are more resistant to change and professorial positions in these universities are carefully guarded by the prevailing male elite. The investigators argue if that elite is forced to appoint women, it responds by marginalising and isolating them (WHEN 2007). Old universities maintain a more masculine culture. In most countries in this study women are more likely to be appointed to senior management positions in new rather than old universities. While new universities often provide more opportunities in senior management for women, this can limit further career progression. It has been observed in the UK, for example, that women appointed to senior management in new universities are unable to later gain further more senior appointments in old universities.

A further related issue is salary scales. There are pay differences between old and new universities. In the UK there is a minimum pay scale for professors, but after that professorial pay is all individually negotiated. In Ireland there has been a fixed scale at professorial level. However, a number of new professorships are being created at a higher salary level in science and technology. Candidates for these positions will be headhunted without open competition and, given the disciplines involved, such posts will most likely be filled by men, illustrating the problem of gender blindness of state policies related to higher education (O’Connor 2007). In New Zealand there are salary bands for professorial positions and research suggests
that women may be appointed at a lower point on the scale compared to comparable men (Neale and White 2004). In Australia and Portugal there is a pay scale for each academic level, whereas in the US again these are individually negotiated. Also, there is the issue of senior administrative positions that are not well paid; for example, director positions, head of programs. These administrative tasks are time consuming, include a pastoral role and do not necessarily count for promotion. Some have power and some do not and women tend to be appointed to the latter. These can then become a ‘poison chalice’ for women seeking career advancement in HE.

It was agreed that HE reproduces the gender roles of the wider labour market. For example, in Portugal, even though more women are graduating, they have more difficulties in getting into the labour market and they earn less, and in Ireland women in the overall labour force are paid less and see educational qualifications as a way forward. However Ruane and Dobson (1990) showed that, controlling for academic discipline, qualifications, research output, teaching, administrative experience and career breaks, Irish women academics were still paid ten per cent less than their male counterparts; while Callan and Wren’s (1994) work implicitly suggested that women’s educational levels needed to be higher to ‘compensate’ for their gender. The pattern of general and specific human capital suggests that women have more focus on general human capital, where pay scales are low. Translating this back to female academics, if we look at professorial statistics in the UK and in Ireland there is a high concentration of women in nursing, and in Australia in Humanities, Social Sciences and Health Sciences. The investigators agree that the project needs to look more closely at which disciplines are feminised and if this is consistent across countries.

An additional factor in women’s under representation in senior management is that they are more likely to be appointed to senior management in private universities and polytechnics. The status of private universities varied in the countries study. For example, in Portugal they have low status; whereas in Turkey retired professors take jobs in private universities because salaries are higher than in public universities.

Another factor in women’s low representation in the professoriate and senior management is the lack of effectiveness of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and Affirmative Action (AA) frameworks (see Bagilhole 2005b). Research by Ozkanli and White (forthcoming) indicates that equal employment opportunity and affirmative action frameworks do not necessarily impact on women’s representation in professorial positions. In universities in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, EEO and AA frameworks have been in existence for over 20 years but the percentage of female professors has increased only slowly. In fact, it has been estimated that at the present rate of progress it will take 50 years for women in the UK to achieve parity with men in the professoriate (THES 2007), and 45 years in Australia (Winchester et.al. 2005).

The preliminary findings of the research project therefore conclude that a complex set of interlocking factors explain women’s low representation in senior management in HE. These factors will be explored in depth in the second phase of the research that will be conducted from September 2007 until March 2008. Male and female senior managers in old and new and public and private universities will be interviewed. These open-ended interviews will explore a range of issues including: what are considered to be the qualities required for senior managers, the relationship between rectors/vice-chancellors and faculties, the difficulties in becoming a senior manager, career planning, gender and senior management, the relationship of female senior managers to other female colleagues, gender and management styles, the gendering of senior management positions, and policies and practices that impact on gender in senior management.
Exploring strategies to improve representation

While strategies to improve women’s representation in senior management will be developed in the second stage of the research project, tentative strategies include:

- Bringing to the attention of HE policy makers and state agencies the link between discipline and gender and its impact on women’s relatively low representation in the professoriate and the flow on effect to women’s even lower representation in senior management
- Implementing policies to achieve more transparency in professorial appointments and acknowledging that non-competitive appointments at this level tend to focus on SET and therefore discriminate against women
- Reviewing gender and levels of appointment in senior management, including appointment of academics and non academics to these positions and the distribution of women
- Identifying and tackling formal and informal practices that maintain hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005)
- Highlighting the issue of gender mainstreaming and its limitations in view of the failure of government to compile comprehensive information on the proportion of women in senior management in Universities

Implications of the research

The study demonstrates that women’s participation in senior academic and management roles in HE across seven countries is significantly lower than at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The next phase of the research will explore with both male and female senior managers the factors in women’s under-representation. This study therefore has implications for the development and implementation of HE policy and organisational practice.

Conclusion

The paradox of women’s strong participation at undergraduate and postgraduate level and under-representation in senior academia and management needs to be addressed by universities. The cultural and organisational factors creating barriers and making these positions unattractive to women should be identified and strategies implemented to ensure that senior management teams include more women.

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