The under-representation of women at Vice Chancellor level in UK Higher Education: silent and strange voices

Abstract

- **Background**

This paper profiles my research into the under-representation of women in UK Vice Chancellorship. The paper explores why so few women are Vice Chancellors, and whether anything can be done to change this.

- **Research methods**

The paper addresses a gap in the literature by drawing on data generated by in-depth interviews with 18 women UK Vice Chancellors/Pro Vice Chancellors.

- **Theoretical framework**

Paechter's (Paechter, 2003) concept of Communities of Practice of Masculinities is being explored through this project and this theoretical framework is being critically appraised by the research.

- **Research findings**

My research aims to: contribute to the growing discourse about the under-representation of women; explore the communities of practice of masculinities framework; and recommend leadership development that will make a difference for women. There are eight themes from the interview data and this paper will focus on two of these, drawing on evidence from them all to underpin the conclusions.

Paper

The Silent and The Strange: exploring the under-representation of women at Vice Chancellor level in UK Higher Education.

Introduction to the paper, and background to my research project

This paper discusses my research into the under-representation of women at Vice Chancellor level (VC) in UK Higher Education. Less than 15% of VC's are women (Breakwell, 2008), which is unrepresentative of them being around 51% of the UK population, almost 50% of early career academics and soon reaching 60% of higher education students (McTavish, 2009). I am enquiring into possible causes of this inequity and whether anything can be done to redress the balance.

The under-representation of women in senior leadership in the UK is not unique to higher education. The public sector and the private sector are both lacking when it comes to fair

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gender presence at the top. Only the voluntary sector manage anywhere near 50% of women Chief Executives (Commission, 2011). The recent report by Lord Davies (Davies, 2011) recommending a voluntary code for increasing women in the FSTE 100 boardrooms demonstrates the Government's concern for this issue. Political parties are well aware that women's votes count and that women are feeling unrepresented at local, regional, national and international levels regardless of their party allegiance.

The under-representation of women in senior leadership in any sector matters because women make up over half the UK population and yet appear from their level of visibility in top jobs to be a minority group. This can be seen as unethical because it is a cause of social injustice and, not only is it indefensible on these grounds, it is also poor business practice. McKinsey and others have demonstrated how much better organisations perform when their senior leadership teams are an inclusive, diverse group with wide ranging views, expertise and experiences (McKinsey, 2010). Since the economic downturn this has been particularly apparent with organisations having gender-balanced executive teams surviving much better than those without.

Women are not predicted to be in the majority of all academics until about 2020 although the same projections show that women will not outnumber men at professorial level until 2070 (Leathwood, 2009). Similarly, at this pace of change it will take 30 years to achieve an equal number of senior women police officers, 45 years to achieve an equal number of women in the senior judiciary, 70 years to achieve an equal number of women directors in the FSTE 100 and 14 elections, or up to 70 years, to achieve an equal number of women MPs. Ultimately there are 5,400 'missing women' in top jobs across the public and private sectors.(Commission, 2011). I am especially interested in the under-representation of women at VC level in Higher Education because the Sector has a responsibility for modelling equity and fairness (Morley, 1996).

In summary, this paper is one in a series culminating from my research into the lack of women at VC level in the UK. This paper, and future papers, will explore gendered leadership culture and communities of practice of masculinities and will also illustrate leadership development interventions that can make a difference for women coming through.

Research Methods

I have come to my research from a background in leadership development in a number of sectors, but latterly in Higher Education, so I have seen at first-hand how this under-representation plays out in the workplace, and I wanted to hear the stories of the women who have reached the top in order inform the conversation around senior academic leadership and the under-representation of women at Vice Chancellor level.

I interviewed 18 women, most at VC level but a small number at PVC level, and asked them about their career journey and their observations about being in such a minority group. Regardless of the limitations in methodology when searching for The Silent, The Strange, The Other (Houle, 2010) I am happy with the light these narratives shine on previously unheard voices.

My interviews have been with powerful women and as such were not as susceptible to the pitfalls of qualitative interviewing outlined by Oakley (Oakley, 2000), although it has been important for me to consider appropriate techniques when researching the powerful (Williams, 1989). However, I would question Whyte (Whyte, 2012) about his approach to researching powerful people as though because of their power they are not vulnerable.

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Theoretical Framework

My experience of senior leadership at close hand provoked my thinking around gendered leadership culture and the emergence within this culture of communities of practice of masculinities. Peachter argues that we all belong to a number of communities of practice throughout our lives and that these can be segregated into those of masculinities or femininities depending on how they work (Paechter, 2003). I have also applied Wenger's (Wenger, 1998)criteria: *the negotiation of meaning* whereby women are learning what it means to become leaders in Higher Education; recognising that *practice is a source of coherence* of the leadership community in which women (and men) have to embrace mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire of performances such as characteristics and behaviours; that *practice is a learning process* whereby women are trying to improve their performance in leadership by joining Communities of Practice as 'apprentices' engaging in 'legitimate peripheral participation'; the 'othering' of outsiders to the community in so much that the *practice operates as a boundary* where senior leadership communities are policed from the inside with only a minority of women becoming members; and the priority of *local practice* where my fieldwork across the UK reveals different stories and rejects essentialism. Thus, my theoretical framework applies Paechter's work to leadership communities in UK Higher Education and argues that senior leadership becomes a community of practice of masculinities (Paechter, 2006).

Findings and Conclusions

This research is examining the under-representation of women at VC level (Morley, 1999) in the UK in order to: contribute to the on-going debate in this area across sectors within and beyond education (Commission, 2011); explore the hypothesis around communities of practice of masculinities; and recommend leadership development interventions that will make a difference for women.

There are eight broad themes emerging from the interview data and this paper will present an overview of all of these themes and then focus on two of them: how women VC's have experienced leadership behaviours in others, both male and female colleagues, which they defined as 'masculinities'; and how they have benefitted by far the most, in leadership development terms, from mentoring and networking (both within and out with the sector). The conclusions and recommendations in this paper will be informed by these themes in particular, and the findings overall more generally.

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