

Scaling the Mountain: an exploration of gendered experience of academic staff in relation to the Research Excellence Framework 2014 (0021)

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Abstract

This paper will explore the experiences of female academics within the research institution in relation to the recent Research Excellence Framework in 2014 (REF 2014). Pursuant to the Equality Act 2010, there is now a legal duty (the Public Sector Equality Duty or PSED) for public bodies and therefore Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to have 'due regard' to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015). It is considered that the PSED thus requires individual institutions to consider and explore the experience of female academics with a view to generating qualitative data about the experience of this group in relation to the REF 2014. This paper will explore some of the early findings of an institutionally funded research project in relation to the gendered experience of academic staff in the research institution in relation to the REF 2014 process and provide the opportunity for local perspectives in this regard to feed into lessons learnt at a national and global level.

This paper explores the experiences of female academics within the research institution in relation to the recent Research Excellence Framework in 2014 (REF 2014). Pursuant to the Equality Act 2010, there is now a legal duty (the Public Sector Equality Duty or PSED) for public bodies and therefore Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to have 'due regard' to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination;
- advance equality of opportunity; and
- foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

(Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015).

The Equality Act 2010 harmonised and consolidated previous anti-discrimination legislation. The Act covers the protected characteristics of:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation.

In order to demonstrate compliance with the PSED, as public sector bodies, the higher education funding bodies also need to consider and understand the impact of their policies on equality. The funding bodies were thus legally required to consider the equality impact of the antecedent RAE in the development of the REF, and as a result equality has been mainstreamed into all relevant elements of the REF. As both employers and public bodies, HEIs were also required to ensure that their REF procedures did not discriminate unlawfully against individuals because of a protected characteristic. When developing their REF procedures, HEIs were required to be mindful that under the fixed-term employee and part-time workers regulations, fixed-term employees and part-time workers have the right not to be treated by an employer any less favourably than the employer treats comparable employees on open contracts or full-time workers. This is also a gender equality issue. As public sector organisations, the PSED has meant that all HEIs needed to conduct equality impact assessments on their policies for selecting staff for the REF.

It is considered by the researchers that the PSED also requires individual institutions to consider and explore the experience of female academics with a view to generating qualitative data about the experience of this group in relation to the REF 2014. This is particularly important in HEIs where there the numbers of women self-selecting for representation in the REF were comparatively low (such as within the research institution).

Following completion of the REF 2014 submission at the research institution, a comparison of the equality characteristics of the 215 staff who self-selected and were considered for submission (against the 151 staff who were eventually selected for submission) was carried out. This analysis indicated that the selection process per se had not had any adverse impact on female staff. However, as a secondary area of interest, the equality characteristics of research active staff (i.e. the 215 staff who self-selected for potential submission to REF 2014) was compared against the profile of all 527 academic and research staff who were in employment on the REF census date. This analysis revealed that female staff were significantly under-represented within the institution amongst researchers. Whilst these variations did not suggest that there were any areas of concern in terms of the REF 2014 selection process, they were considered to be worthy of further investigation.

As such, institutionally funded research commenced in June 2015 exploring the experience of female academics submitting to the REF 2014 within the research institution. This research aims to be an important addition to emerging dialogue in this area and also ensure that an appropriate evidential base is provided for University diversity and equality strategies in the future. In July 2015, a large scale questionnaire was disseminated across the research institution to provide a base line investigating the relationship between gender and perceptions of being 'research active', and the knock on effects to the REF process.

This paper explores some of the early findings of this research based on the initial dissemination of the questionnaire and provides the opportunity for local perspectives in relation to gendered research activity within HE to feed into lessons learnt at a national and global level.

