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Introduction and background literature

This study is built on the observation that both vertical and horizontal segregation persist in academia: women and men are unequally represented in scientific disciplines, and across the different grades and positions in universities ([EC, 2008](#), [2009a](#), [2009b](#), [2012](#); [Sonnert & Holton, 1996](#)). Birkbeck does not constitute an exception: following the last Equality Report (Birkbeck Human Resources 2013), men are highly represented in senior management (70%) and among the professors (58%), while women are mostly present in the assistant and junior professional staff (66%); in line with elsewhere in the UK, women are especially underrepresented in the School of Science and in the School of Business, Economics and Informatics (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013). The unequal representation of women and men can be better understood when referring to the “gendered” nature of organisations: gender has a performative nature, i.e. gender is created and recreated through our daily routines and interactions, and organisations themselves are “gendered” ([Acker, 1990](#); [Butler, 1990](#); [West & Zimmerman, 1987](#)). This affects not only the choice of professions (horizontal segregation), but it undermines career and progression opportunities as well (vertical segregation). Furthermore, at a micro level, women are likely to be the ones who more often experience discrimination or encounter difficulties in contributing to important processes or in making their voice heard ([Etkowitz, Fuchs, Gupta, Kemelgor, & Ranga, 2008](#); [Etkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi, 2000](#); [Gherardi & Poggio, 2001](#); [Rosser, 2004](#); [Valian, 1999](#)).

Universities are not an exception: the management of academic institutions is gendered in terms of power relations and career expectations ([Deem, 2003](#)), this influencing career trajectories and access to leadership roles ([Morley, 2013a](#), [2013b](#); [Woodward, 2007](#)). Gender biases might inform the criteria of academic excellence ([Bagilhole & Goode, 2001](#); [Fassa & Kradolfer, 2013](#); [Knights & Richards, 2003](#); [van den Brink & Benschop, 2012a](#); [van den Brink, Benschop, & Jansen, 2010](#)), and the persistence of male networks disadvantages women ([van den Brink & Benschop, 2014](#)). Moreover, academic careers are characterized by a high work load ([Araujo, 2008](#); [Bailyn, 2003](#)) and intense mobility ([Ackers, 2003](#)), this impacting especially on women's careers.

The metaphor by van den Brink and Benschop ([2012b](#)) of gender inequality as a “seven-headed dragon”, a creature with a multitude of faces in different social contexts, well depicts that gender imbalance is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon. For this reason, in order to investigate the underrepresentation of women in academia, it is worth using an in-depth approach and applying a range of methods.

Research design

This study has been guided by a holistic, in-depth, inductive approach inspired by interpretive research ([Janesick, 1994](#); [Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#); [Silverman, 2005](#)): it focuses on the two schools in Birkbeck in which women are especially underrepresented, i.e. the School of Science and the School of Business, Economics and Informatics (BEI); both women and men are part of the study to assure a diversity of voices and perspectives. The research questions are the following:

1. How do professional and personal trajectories of Birkbeck members of staff unfold in the two Schools where women are underrepresented?
2. How are accounts of personal and professional trajectories gendered?

The methods envisaged to fulfil these aims are individual in-depth interviews following a narrative approach, and focus group discussions. Data have been collected between October 2014 and February 2015. The table below shows the details of the sample.

	Women				Men			
	Academic		Professional		Academic		Professional	
	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior
Interviews	3	4	1	2	3	1		
Focus groups I	1		1	1	1		1	
Focus groups II		1	2		1	1		

Junior academic = from Research Assistant to Lecturer

Senior academic = from Senior Lecturer to Professor

Junior professional = staff at starting grades (up to 5)

Senior professional = team leaders and staff with wider responsibilities (more than grade 6).

Analysis followed an iterative and cross-comparative approach, with the aim to look for recurrent themes, which have been reassembled in the five patterns presented in the next section.

Preliminary findings

Five thematic patterns emerged through our data: high workload and the challenges in relation to work-life balance (this being experienced by everybody in our sample); the intersection of local and trans-local phenomena (initiatives and trends happening beyond an academic institution highly impact on daily routines, and the general trend towards benchmarks creates new pressures on academics); the differences in career trajectories when comparing junior and senior staff; indirect discriminations and gender bias disadvantaging women; the importance (but the lack of) socialisation and training to new roles.

What is remarkable (and we will further show that in the presentation), is that women, independently of being in an academic or professional role, are still the ones who take most care of their work-life balance; when they have familial obligations, they are very often the ones taking (or expected to take) this burden. Besides, women more often experience discrimination, especially indirect discrimination undervaluing their role; and they are the ones who can be easily criticised because of futile reasons (such as their appearance). Academic staff experience the heaviest workload, but can also count on flexible working hours and on more training opportunities compared to professional staff; the problem for professional staff is represented by the absence of a progression structure in their career. Junior academics, both women and men, have a strong focus on their publication pipeline; moreover, even when they have already spent quite a few years in academia, they seem to be less aware of both the impact of gender and the challenges of managing academics. Senior academics, both women and men, show a strong awareness of the complexities of gender dynamics, of the need to commit to a more gender sensitive environment, and of the benefits of training for new roles.

Conclusions

This study contributes to show how gender differences strongly survive in terms of indirect discrimination and independently of one's own role and position; also, we underline how this intersects with other career features (such as seniority in one's own position), organisational features (availability of training and of clear career progression structures), and national and international dynamics (characteristics of an academic career today). Our results can be particularly useful not only to researchers, but to academic managers as well, since they allow the different perspectives of

more groups to emerge: this can be useful for reshaping academic practices and for building a more inclusive environment.

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