

Female academics and career progression: Can Structured Writing retreats make a difference? (0180)

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Introduction

Gender equality in higher education institutions (HEI) is an international topic of interest. There remains a global gender gap in terms of the percentages of women working in HEIs and the percentage of women in managerial and professorial roles (Morley 2013). For example, although in the United Kingdom in 2012/13, 53.9% of women work as academics in HEIs, only 21.7% were in professorial, and 27.9% in senior management roles (Equality Challenge Unit 2014). In addition, publication rates for women are globally lower across disciplines and publications, while impact ratings for women are not significantly different to those of men (Nielsen 2015).

Louise Morley's 2013 position paper regarding gender inequality in leadership in HEIs identified three ways of 'fixing': (1) women, (2) organisations and/or (3) knowledge to address gender inequality. The emphasis of initiatives is currently on the first, in terms of leadership training and mentorship (e.g. Aurora Leadership programme and eument-net), and second (e.g. Athena Swan) of these options. However this analysis appears to miss the core meritocratic component of academic progression of addressing women's capacity for research productivity and output. There are currently very few programmes which specifically promote research outputs for female academics (e.g. Grant 2006), and there appear to be none in the United Kingdom.

Previous publications on residential, structured writing retreats (SWR) have demonstrated an improvement in writers' confidence, and research output and activity, but also in professional support networks across disciplines and Universities, and an increase in general academic confidence (McLeod et al 2012, Murray and Cunningham, 2011, Murray et al 2012). These benefits appear to be particularly salient for female academics (Grant, 2006, Moore et al 2010). Although research output is generally considered essential for career progression in most HEIs, there is currently no research which has specifically explored what the impacts are of attending structured writing retreats in terms of how this may impact on their position and role within a higher education environment. The aim of this pilot study was to explore women's view on the possible relationship between structured writing retreats and career progression for women.

Methods

A focus group method was employed to explore the views of female academics of the potential impact of writing retreats on their career progression. All female participants who attended a structured writing retreat in December 2014 were invited to participate. The only exclusion criterion was that participants had to have attended more than one retreat. The focus group was audio recorded using a mobile device. An inductive thematic analysis was carried out on the verbatim transcript of the focus group.

Findings

There were 12 female participants (out of 15) at this retreat of whom 9 agreed to participate in the focus group. Of the remaining participants: 1 participant was unable to attend the evening session, and 2 participants attended the retreat for the first time. The themes emerged from the data.

Structured Writing retreat=Writing=Career Progression?

Early on in the discussion it was stated by one participant that writing was essential to career progression, either in terms of publications, a completed PhD thesis or conference attendance. This statement was generally uncontested and there was little discussion regarding the direct impact of Structured Writing retreats on their career progression as it appeared that increasing research output was a 'given' when you attended writing retreats although some ambiguity was expressed in terms of the 'moving goal posts' of academia.

Learning to prioritise

One aspect that was discussed by a few participants was the perception that while most of the participants were undertaking PhDs, women were less likely to prioritise their own careers over the needs of their department or the needs of their families. In relation to work environments this meant that the ability to multi-task and the ability to cope with the daily demand of work meant that they were expected to take on increasing workloads in terms of teaching or management. In contrast, some male colleagues were perceived to be less able or skilled to carry out teaching and administrative duties, but instead were provided with additional support to fulfil their individual career paths. In addition some colleagues in senior roles (both male and female) were perceived to be unsupportive of the self-development of some participants by increasing the workload of these women, rather than viewing a focus on thesis completion a part of their role. This lack of priority for career development appeared to be enhanced by the perception that women were selfish if they did focus on their careers.

Attending retreat provided participants with both the space and the time to progress their writing. This prioritising of writing at retreat appeared to transfer for some women to their work setting where they would become more bounded in terms of prioritising their career development.

Discussion and Conclusion

As most of the participants were in the process of completing a PhD as a milestone towards career progression, it was difficult to establish a direct link between SWR and career progression. SWR however was seen as a means of completing publications and PhDs. Furthermore, SWR appeared to enable women to say 'no' or do less of the things that did not support their careers. More longitudinal research is needed though to investigate the impact of structured writing retreats on the career progression of female academics. If writing is essential to a meritocratic approach to career progression, then structured writing retreats will contribute to the career progression of women. Structured writing retreats could therefore be seen as having the potential to address gender inequality and should be embedded in University strategies to this end.

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