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Title Gender inequality at the top: Why 'fixing' the women isn't the answer

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Women continue to be under-represented at executive team level in most organisations, including universities (Morley 2013). Although women now comprise 45% of academics, only 20% of vice chancellors are female (ECU 2015). Furthermore, a 2016 census shows that deputy and pro vice chancellors (PVCs) remain predominantly white (96%) male (70%) professors (Shepherd 2017).

The reasons for the relative dearth of women at the top are many and various but two of the most frequently cited are a shortage of women in the academic leadership pipeline – only 22% of professors are female (ECU 2015) – and women's 'missing agency'. Strategic agency, or the capacity to act (Archer 1996), is said to be a requirement for career progression in academia (Acker 2010). However, women may be perceived as deficient in this regard, lacking self-confidence or ambition. Earlier studies have found senior female academics to be wary of applying for management roles without specific encouragement or endorsement of their credentials by others (Chesterman *et al.* 2005) and more likely than men to cite a lack of confidence as an inhibiting factor on their career progression (Manfredi *et al.* 2014).

Previous work has further suggested that women are opting out of applying for senior management jobs either because they do not wish to get involved in "competitive, self-promotional behaviour" (Leonard 2001, p.4) or because they are ambivalent at best about taking on what they perceive to be unappealing and overly demanding roles (Chesterman *et al.* 2005).

This presentation highlights gender-related findings from my research that provide some contrary evidence and offer fresh insights into the barriers women face in securing senior management jobs. These emanate from two separate studies: an ESRC-funded examination of the appointment of PVCs in pre-1992 English universities and an SRHE-funded research award that updates and extends this work to post-1992 universities.

Data are drawn from three main sources. Firstly, a 2016 census of the entire PVC cohort in 92 pre- and post-1992 Universities UK member universities (excluding private and small, specialist institutions). This provides a snapshot in time of the socio-demographic and professional profile of all 444 PVCs in these institutions using publicly available data primarily from university websites. Secondly, an online survey of 132 academic and professional services third-tier managers (i.e. at the level immediately below PVC - typically deans or heads of school and professional services directors) designed to understand their aspirations relating to becoming a PVC. Thirdly, semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 vice chancellors, 26 PVCs appointed via external open competition and 17 third-tier managers. These were wide-ranging discussions about the nature of the PVC role and recruitment and selection process and the motivations of current and aspiring PVCs.

Findings from this research reveal little difference between men and women in relation to their aspirations to climb the academic management ladder. Indeed, a higher proportion of female deans and heads of school say they are very likely to apply for a PVC role. For many, a management career is considered an attractive option. At PVC level too, women display a high degree of self-confidence and are no less likely than men to aspire to the top job.

However, applying for a job is no guarantee of success and the data reveal three important structural issues that help explain why the proportion of women being appointed to PVC posts remains relatively low. These are:

- (i) An increasing need for PVC candidates to be geographically mobile and evidence the external career capital gained from working in other institutions (Floyd and Dimmock 2011).
- (ii) A conservative and risk-averse approach to recruitment that places a premium on prior experience (as opposed to competence or potential).
- (iii) Homosociability, or the tendency to recruit people like oneself (Blackmore et al. 2006).

On the basis of this evidence it is concluded that women's 'missing agency' (itself a deficit view of women's attitudes and capabilities) does not provide an adequate explanation for their continued under-representation. The 'fix-the-women' approach implicit in some current initiatives, such as the Aurora programme, is therefore unlikely to be sufficient to redress the current gender imbalance. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings will be discussed and the views of participants invited.

References

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