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Early career mobility of female doctorate holders

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

Work or career mobility is a multidimensional concept that has been used to refer to internal mobility within an institution or field (Schwabe, 2011), geographical mobility (Nerad and Heggelund, 2008), disciplinary mobility (Henn and Maxfield, 1983), and mobility between sectors (Morrison, Rudd, and Nerad, 2011). This paper will present the research evidence we have since the 1980s on the types of doctorates achieved by women and the types of mobility they experience during their early career period. Understanding trends in educational choices by women and their work mobility in the first few years after graduation not only provides some indicators of the flexibility in the job market and the adaptability of doctorate holders but also mid- and long-term career opportunities, choices, mobility and achievement. This knowledge can help universities to inform employment policies as well as the training and advice provided to female postgraduates studying for a doctorate.

Full paper

Introduction

The number of female doctorate holders showed a considerable increase in many parts of the world in the last decades of the 20th century (Nerad and Heggelund, 2008; Schwabe, 2011; Gardner, 2009), a trend which continues nowadays. In fact, it has been

reported that disciplinary gender imbalances have been slowly changing (Moore, Meiksins and Root, 2013) and that, more recently, in Europe women are already a majority among PhD graduates (EC, 2019). However, it is worth noting that levels of female participation in doctoral programmes still vary considerably depending on the subject area and, to some extent, on the region (EC, 2019; Fiske, 2012; WEF 2021).

Study

This study presents a review of the literature published in the four decades before the pandemic (1980-2020) on the early career mobility of female doctorate holders around the world. The aim is to relate women's doctoral degrees with their mobility patterns in order to identify the recurring promoters and barriers to their employment experiences during their early careers, that is 'five years following PhD completion' (Bosanquet et al., 2017, 890).

Therefore, we interrogated the global research literature with the following questions:

1. What are the types and subjects of women's doctoral qualifications?
2. What is the early career mobility of female doctorate holders?

Methodology

We conducted a strategic literature search on the following databases: ERIC, ERC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Taylor & Francis Journals Online, Web of Science. We included quantitative and qualitative studies published in English between 1980 and 2020 which referred to female doctorate holders' early career mobility and employment. After screening 177 studies found in the search, 23 studies were selected for meeting the inclusion criteria (Ackers, 2004; Ahn, 2014; Auriol, 2007; Austin et al., 1985; Borrero et al., 2018; Bozzon et al., 2017; Cañibano et al., 2016; Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez, 2005; Fusulier et al., 2017; Gumpertz et al. 2017; Holley and Young, 2005; Horner et al. 1996; Iglesias-Fernández et al., 2014; Ismail and Rasdi, 2007; Kulis and Sicotte, 2002; Lin and Chiu, 2016; Maddrell et al., 2019; Marjanovic et al., 2016; Millard, 2016; Miller et al., 2005; Shinozaki, 2017; Wenzel, 1992; Yoon and Kim,

2019).

Discussion of findings

Not surprisingly, the majority of studies selected were based in geographical areas with the highest percentages of women doctoral graduates: Europe and North America (OECD, 2021).

The research did not distinguish between types of doctoral degrees, with one exception referring to a Professional doctorate in Social Work and three to Doctor of Medicine, so it is not possible to establish the range of doctorates women may be choosing to study. Therefore, it is not possible to identify whether this aspect of their qualifications has an impact on their early careers. However, disciplines were explicitly mentioned in all the research. The majority of studies involved participants with qualifications in STEM subjects, 11 studies focused on qualifications in Arts, Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, and 3 studies investigated medical doctorates. Most studies included a multidisciplinary population, with only 5 studies focusing on a single subject discipline. Given that there is still a majority of women in the Arts and Humanities (HESA 2020) these findings seem to indicate that gender-focused research at this educational level has shown a preference for the study of the careers of female graduates in traditionally male subjects.

We found that career mobility is a concept that referred to four dimensions: internal, international, disciplinary, and sectorial. In most studies there were references to two mobility dimensions (mostly internal and international) with eight studies only referring to one of these and only two studies referring to three types of mobility. Very little was reported about disciplinary mobility, i.e. being employed outside doctoral expertise, which raises the question if this dimension is truly insignificant or an oversight of the research. Also, since the focus in our study was on early career, it is possible that such mobility could be more prominent at a later stage rather than immediately after graduation.

The overall picture from the research found displays a more limited early career mobility (in all its four dimensions) for women since they tend to attract more precarious jobs and adapt to family/partner's needs. It is clear that numerous combinations of work/life demands

continue to lead to more women with doctoral degrees leaving academia during or at the end of the early career period, and therefore before reaching senior or permanent positions.

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