

PERSISTENCE OF THE PROFESSORIAL GENDER PAY GAP: WHY DO WOMEN PROFESSORS FAIL TO THRIVE?

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Research Domains

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Abstract

In the UK, the professorial gender pay gap in favour of men has remained static for many years. Existing research on gendered academic pay does not focus on women professors or control for rank. Our paper aims to review current literature in order to determine the most convincing explanations of why women professors, once appointed, fail to thrive. The available evidence suggests that gender differences in professorial research productivity disappear when academic rank is controlled for. Bias in universities' responses to outside job offers may account for part of the professorial gender pay gap. Men academics receive more offers from other universities than do women academics with comparable achievements and universities pay their targeted men academics more in order to retain them. Additionally, we suggest that there is gender bias within universities in the assessment of women professors' performance and in the link between assessment and pay rises awarded.

Full paper

In the UK, the proportion of professors who are women increased from 15.1% in 2003-04 to 27.9% in 2009/20. In contrast, for the same years the professorial gender pay gap in favour of men remained static, circling around 6 percent. (See table 1). Women professors appear to experience a “sticky floor”, becoming stuck at the lowest professorial pay grades while men professors quickly jump out of these (Frank, 2020).

Much of the literature on women’s experience in academia focuses on the difficulties women face being appointed to professorships. Existing research on gendered academic pay, does not focus on women professors or control for rank. Our paper aims to review current literature in order to determine the most convincing explanations of why women professors, once appointed, fail to thrive.

Research productivity is the key to pay rises in universities. Overall, research productivity comparisons of academic men and women show the former to be more productive than the latter. Women professors, however, form a distinct group; having battled for promotion in gendered organizations they are likely to be highly productive. In contrast, non-professorial women are a disparate group, comprising women who, in the face of discrimination and lack of encouragement, have settled for a teaching/administrative careers, and of younger women keenly researching in order to secure promotion.

Gender differences in research productivity disappear when academic rank is controlled for. Although evidence is scant, women professors publish as many journal articles as men professors (Sato et al., 2021) and have the same chances of winning research grants (Holliday et al., 2014). Further, women professors are not handicapped by family responsibilities (Kelly and Grant, 2011), particularly due to their timing of their children’s births (Joerks et al., 2014). Women professors bear more responsibility for academic housekeeping than men professors (McFarlane, 2018); the relationship between gender and teaching work load, however, does not hold for professors (Santos & Dang Van Phu. 2019).

A substantial number of authors investigating the relationship between gender and research productivity/pay report finding an unexplained gap in the explanatory power of their selected variables. They attribute this to gender discrimination but do not investigate further (for example, Kelly and Grant, 2022). We are interested in explanations of how gender discrimination operates within universities.

Bias in universities' response to outside job offers. Pressures from university evaluation exercises lead to outside job offers being made to highly productive academics such as professors. Men academics receive more offers from other universities than do women academics of comparable achievements (Blackaby et al., 2005; Mumford & Sechel, 2019). Further, universities pay poached men academics more in order to retain them than they do women academics.

Bias in universities' internal pay procedures. In the UK, professorial pay is determined at the local level. Generally, Heads of School review professors on an annual/biennial basis. Their reports are forwarded to their universities' pay review committees. Professors may/may not have sight of these assessments. Usually, professors may submit a statement making their case for a pay rise. Professors are often unaware of the details of their universities' pay procedures. University assessment procedures are criticised for their lack of transparency, not only in the UK (Witteman et al. 2019 Caprile et al., 2012). We suggest that a major problem for professorial equal pay is gender bias in the assessment of women professors' performance and in the link between the assessment and pay rises awarded. Kjeldal et al. (2006) reflect upon embedded male patterns of behaviour in academia operating beneath the facade of universities' equal opportunities policies.

Research in this area is scant. We highlight the findings of two recent large-scale studies. In both, while the assessment of professors' performance was highly regulated, there was still a gendered mismatch between assessment and pay awards. Kortendiek et al. (2021) investigated the pay of men and women professors in German universities. Professors' basic pay was considerably enhanced by bonuses (Leistungsbezüge). Women professors received these less often and in lower amounts. The authors

concluded that Leistungsbezüge differences were due, not to differences in performance, but to women's unequal negotiating positions. Brower and James (2020) investigated pay differences between men and women academics in New Zealand universities. These universities use in a holistic and nuanced way of assessing research performance, including peer esteem and research contributions as well publications. These authors found that women whose research career trajectories resembled that of men were paid less.

We need further research on the formal and informal operation of universities' professorial pay rises.

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