

151 Trajectories of merit: Re-viewing leadership in elite universities

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Abstract

Vice Chancellors, Presidents, or Rectors occupy elite public positions in universities. A cursory glance of the roll call of names across the top 100 universities globally reveals the dominance of white males. Our theoretical disquiet in this article is linked with an enduring unease that processes of formal and informal merit work to reproduce, not eradicate, deep inequities in the recruitment and appointment of Vice Chancellors, Presidents, or Rectors at the world's elite institutions. We argue that underpinning rhetoric of meritocracy works as a visible and audible performative tool that offers an appearance of a just, fair, and neutral process.

Full paper

The blurring of boundaries between higher education, business, and politics as well as pressures to remain globally competitive have had a cumulative effect on ways in which universities are governed, managed, and led (Burkinshaw, 2015; Fitzgerald, 2020; O'Connor, 2014). What has occurred is a serial restructuring, re-purposing and rebranding as universities have sought to exert themselves in the global education market, and particularly in post-pandemic times. A powerful institutional logic identifies leadership as the core component to successful organisational transformation (Lipton, 2020; Whitechurch and Gordon, 2017). Accordingly, it is the leader who is identified as possessing the required personal qualities, skills, behaviours, and dispositions to recalibrate institutions, provide strategic direction and address indifference and resistance (Coates et al., 2021; Burkinshaw and White, 2017; White and O'Connor, 2017). However, as we argue, a more nuanced approach to understanding the career profiles and trajectories of those chosen to lead is overdue. Thus, this conference paper contributes to the literatures on higher education leadership in its interrogation of what we refer to as the façade of diversity that underpins leaders and leadership in elite institutions.

Advertisements for elite roles such as VC, President or Rector frequently cite that “women and minority groups” are encouraged to apply. These roles are seen to require a distinctive set of abilities, traits, and skills that assume individual merit or worth can be quantified, separated from social or institutional context, and assigned to an individual irrespective of gender or other protected characteristics (Kumra, 2014; Sommerlad, 2012). In effect these advertisements are deeply problematic. On the one hand there is recognition of a fixed, objective, and stable set of attributes (qualifications, skills) that are linked with individual performance and talent deemed to be merit-worthy (Betts, 2023; Sommerlad, 2012). Yet on the other, there is scant understanding or recognition of the illusion of merit and meritocratic principles that are embedded in these discourses.

What continues to occur is that equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) discourses have become commodified in order that those “encouraged to apply” satisfy recruitment, rather than appointment policies. Despite the rhetoric about the importance of an inclusive and diverse workforce, the reality is that gendered and racialized organisational cultures in higher education continue to be an institutional norm (Arday, 2018; Bhopal, 2018; Maylor, 2018). This, as we outline, is a global, complex, and intractable issue.

In this conference paper we propose that a different set of questions need to be asked about performative understandings of merit and meritocracy. We suggest that despite well-intentioned and merit-based recruitment, appointment processes and targeted intervention strategies to diversify applicant pools, inequalities persist. Hence, we interrogate the inevitable bias of recruitment practices precisely because trajectories of merit serve to reinforce, not displace, the status quo. We suggest that recruitment discourses that call for a litany of competencies, experiences and skills are underpinned by unwritten assumptions/implicit biases that require candidates to demonstrate their potential assimilation to the ‘cultural fit’ of the institution. It is this cultural fit and the underpinning framing of what constitutes ‘merit’, that create new forms of bias that reinscribe what is valued and rewarded by

access to public power and position and primarily enacted by bodies which are male, white, and middle class in Western contexts (Acker, 2006; Connell, 2005). Research related to ethno-racial privilege largely analyses the relationship between a 'white' population and racialised 'other'. Attention equally needs to focus on how ethno-racial privilege operates in different contexts (Hasmath and Solomon, 2021). If universities claim that they are global institutions, this ought to be reflected in the demographic profile of their students, staff/faculty as well as leadership. Thus, we trouble these discourses of merit that promote a level of performance of meritocracy yet, as we suggest, reinforce the sameness of leadership. In querying discourses of merit and troubling the façade of diversity we take an intersectional approach. Our framing moves beyond singular and conventional forms of discrimination by adopting a more holistic analysis. Here Sandel's (2020) argument that the neoliberal discourse on merit has negative consequences for democracy and the common good will be considered within the context of higher education leadership, EDI, and the sociology of elites.

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