

367 Exploring 'readiness': Women academics and the demonstrative mangle of promotions practices in the performative university

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Promotions practices work as gatekeepers for women academics, filtering who gets through, who is deemed to meet the grade, who is successful. This presentation zones in on the work that promotions criteria and promotions practices do in regulating academic women's promotion. Based on insights from a UKRI/University of Bath funded project entitled WomenCAN: Breaking Promotion Barriers, Changing University Cultures, the paper discusses women academics' often bruising experiences of promotion, and that institutionally gendered micro-practices continue to ensure that 'merit sticks to men' (Woodhams et al., 2022). Insights from the project – a survey with Heads of Department, narrative interviews with senior women academics, and a bespoke coaching course – challenge the view that promotions criteria are neutral, objective descriptors of standard tasks and levels which can/are 'applied equally' to individual cases across all contexts. In fact, promotions practices are shaped by gendered perceptions of career paths, readiness and deservingness.

Full paper

Promotions criteria are often held to be neutral, objective descriptors of the standard tasks and levels required to achieve promotion. As such, they provide institutions with apparently transparent mechanisms for sorting out the deserving and the not yet deserving, and they offer those applying for promotion an apparently clear list of requirements and standards that must be demonstrated in order for promotion to be achieved. And yet, research continues to show gender pay gaps (HESA, 2023), research funding gaps (Weale and Barr, 2018), and an academic promotions success gap shaped by gender, race and class (Bailey, 2022). Promotions practices continue to act as gatekeepers for women academics, filtering who gets through, who is deemed to meet the grade, and who is successful, thus regulating academic women's career paths, identities and roles within HEIs.

We explore these tensions in the light of insights from a UKRI/University of Bath funded project entitled WomenCAN: Breaking Promotion Barriers, Changing University Cultures. Empirical evidence from the project disclosed that women academics' experiences of promotion are often bruising, and that institutionally gendered micro-practices continue to ensure that 'merit sticks to men' (Woodhams et al., 2022). Insights from the project – a survey with Heads of Department, narrative interviews with senior women academics, and a bespoke coaching course – challenge the view that promotions criteria are neutral, objective descriptors of standard tasks and levels which can/are 'applied equally' to individual cases across all contexts. In fact, promotions practices are shaped by gendered perceptions of career paths, readiness and deservingness.

In this context, perceptions of 'readiness' for promotion takes on significance. Many women academics who go for promotion to professor have had the experience of being told they are 'not ready' for promotion by male peers but this notion of 'readiness' is itself deeply shaped by gendered factors that hide under the radar. Assumptions regarding who or how 'professorship' or research leadership should and can be demonstrated, or who possesses the required attributes for promotion to reader or professor, pull the interpretation of apparently 'neutral' promotions criteria into the realm of gendered political micropractices. As Yamamoto (2019: 167) points out, women in research leadership positions are often there at the behest of a patriarchal powerbase built on 'elite, academic, male, social and cultural capital'. That this is the case is not new news! Thornton's (2013: 3) exploration of the cultural practices of neoliberal

universities notes that the 're-masculinisation of the university' is endemic in producing forms of gendered behaviour which valorise stereotypically masculinist behaviours - behaviours which, Morley (2016: 5) points out enable a 'virility culture' of competitive individualism to thrive'.

What is new, we think, is what can be disclosed by a specific focus on the work that promotions criteria and promotions practices do in continually re-shaping and re-producing at the micro-level the institutional gender order which continues to entrench long-standing patterns of inequality which, while changing somewhat over time, are doing so at a glacial pace. In addition, our project discloses insights on how promotions practices shape academic women's perceptions that they have to discipline themselves and their careers within and around these institutional inequalities: bending their minds and accommodating their bodies to try to fit in with (and failing to fit in with) the rules of the neoliberal game which continue to privilege white, middle class, able-bodied, internationally mobile male academics causes affective damage – shame, despair, burnout, for example (Morley, 2003; Taylor, 2020). Covid-19 effects feed into these systemic, affective and identity concerns (Sharafizad, F. et al., 2022).

Promotions criteria in some ways also contribute to the invisibilisation and stigmatisation of women's' chosen career and promotion pathways: their choices are seen as lacking in legitimacy in academic authority structures which continue to privilege research over leadership, teaching, citizenship and engagement. All of this has negative effects on women's career progression and on perceptions of women's institutional value. As O'Connor's (2020) work indicates, equality is impeded by structures, cultures and identities within HEIs, and it is within this micropolitical institutional nexus that promotions criteria and promotions practices gain animacy, force and power. We bring a feminist theoretical orientation to the discussion of how women attend to and address the demonstrative mangle of promotions practices in the performative university. This is a subject worthy of close investigation. Findings from the project will, we hope, provide new recommendations as to how women can be better supported in promotion through institutional practices at departmental, faculty and university level.

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