

Beyond the feedback form: signs of resistance in ongoing impacts of a university career development programme for female staff.

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Emerging findings of ongoing research into the experiences of female university staff engaging with an in-house, women-only, career development programme show a range of reported outcomes. These include promotions, job applications, greater assertiveness in performance reviews, increased clarity and ownership as to career aspirations, enhanced reflective skills and a sense of community. How do we reconcile these ostensibly positive outcomes with critiques of such programmes for focusing on individual women as 'the problem' in a female-dominated sector with a long-standing gender pay gap. This paper reflects on survey and interview data from two cohorts of academic and professional services staff over a six-month period following programme completion. Going 'beyond the feedback form' is already yielding nuanced and intangible outcomes. Moreover, the data may be revealing signs of resistance to a linear career narrative; a change of mindset in relation to career trajectory and aspirations.

Full paper

This paper reflects on emerging findings of ongoing research into the experiences of female university staff engaging with an in-house, women-only, career development programme. It considers whether participant data might be revealing some signs of resistance to normative career narratives. The aim of the research project is threefold. Firstly, as a piece of institutional research it will inform future provision and funding decisions. Secondly, it deliberately goes beyond the standard feedback form to explore ongoing impacts of the programme over a six-month period. Thirdly, it critically reflects on how corporate 'gender equality projects can become centred on women subjects and their deficient selves so that equality is constituted less as a matter of social justice than a function of individualized pathways to success' (Meade, Kiely and O'Donovan, 2023: 1720).

Meade, Kiely and O'Donovan argue that higher education (HE) career development programmes for female staff constitute gender inequality as a problem that requires 'fixing the women' and that such programmes ultimately propagate 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) in a structurally unequal, competitive sector. The higher education (HE) sector is female dominated (55%, Advance HE, 2023) but has a long-standing gender pay gap (UCEA 2024). 45% of senior managers in HE professional services; 37% of academic senior managers and 29% of professors are female (Advance HE, 2023). The Athena Swan Charter, the UK HE sector's flagship accreditation for advancing gender equality identifies a range of

challenges to career progression, including institutional culture, promotion processes and career development training provision. Several women-only career development programmes and interventions exist within the sector. These include Aurora, described as 'Advance HE's leadership development initiative for women' (Advance HE, 2024) and the 100 Black Women Professors NOW programme: 'a pioneering systemic change programme aiming to increase the number of Black women in the academic pipeline' (WHEN, 2024).

In this context, the modern, urban university in question recently commissioned an external provider to deliver a women-only career development programme in-house. The stated aim of the programme was to empower participants to create clarity and focus around their career direction. Thirty professional services and global majority staff at lower grades were enrolled in the first iteration of the programme (January–March 2023). Another thirty staff were enrolled in the second iteration (November 2023–January 2024). The latter cohort consisted of professional services and academic staff at mid-level grades. All attendees were invited to participate in the research. I recruited ten participants from the first programme iteration, twelve from the second. Each participant completed three online surveys and three individual interviews over a six-month period. They were asked to reflect on their motivation for attending the programme, experiences of it, career aspirations, challenges and outcomes.

Emerging findings show participants' motivations for enrolling in the programme cluster around three overlapping themes: feeling stuck, wanting clarity and wanting to progress. The majority expressed strongly positive views on their experiences of the four-session programme, comprising two consecutive in-person days and two action-learning set sessions (one in-person/one virtual). Participants particularly valued the acquisition of relevant tools; opportunities for structured reflection; meeting others in similar circumstances and goal setting. Negative experiences arose from unmet expectations and limited opportunities for follow up and support.

In terms of concrete outcomes, participants reported promotions, external job offers, job applications and training. The first cohort completed their programme during an organisational restructure, resulting in opportunities for some and removal of opportunities for others. Participants also reported a range of less tangible outcomes including greater assertiveness; increased clarity and ownership as to career aspirations; enhanced reflective skills and a greater sense of community.

Several participants to date attribute 'a change in mindset' to the programme. For example, when applying for new roles, they prioritised consideration of the fit **between** themselves and the role/organisation, rather than assuming they should fit **in**. Others realised they were content in their current role, or saw potential to pursue challenges within it, rather than move on. One had acknowledged further career development in her field required skills she did not have and was not interested in acquiring.

These could be interpreted as signs that, rather than being passive recipients of a corporate career rhetoric, some participants are using the reflective skills gained through the programme to reassess their positioning within the organisation and on the career 'ladder'. Is a focus on individualised pathways moderated a greater sense of connection with others at similar career stages? Data gathering continues with the second cohort, but going beyond the feedback form has already yielded nuanced and intangible outcomes.

References

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