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Inspiring future generations: embracing plurality and difference in higher education

Women in Leadership: Absent talent in UK HEIs

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Part 1: Abstract (143 words)

This paper provides insights from one of the outcomes of a White Rose university consortium research project exploring plurality and difference in higher education within the professoriate. Leeds, Sheffield and York universities worked together to explore the absences and aspirations of women in professorial leadership (Morley, 2013b). Each university facilitated seminars and one-to-one interviews with professors that sought to elicit working life experiences, constraints and success stories in relation to career advancement in the academy. Preliminary findings are reported in this paper.

The paper illuminates key themes from the participants' accounts and seeks to make recommendations on ways in which the findings contribute to embracing plurality and difference in higher education (Saunders et al., 2009). The paper further highlights the researchers' experiences of collaborative working across three very different HE institutions and their ambitions for the next steps in this longitudinal research project.

Part 2: Outline (985 words)

Women are seriously under-represented at leadership levels in the academy making up less than 20% of the professoriate (UCU, 2013). This is within the context of only 14% of vice chancellors being women and 5400 'missing women' from senior appointments across UK society (Commission, 2011). Women are predicted to be the majority of all academics by 2020 although the same projections show that women will not be fairly represented at professorial level until 2070 at the earliest (Leathwood and Read, 2009).

Plurality and difference are crucial dynamics to embrace within the professoriate workforce and yet we know from available data reported above that women remain marginalised or absent from leadership roles within HEIs in the UK as well as elsewhere. Through embracing the call for greater plurality and difference, the research explores the barriers, challenges and possible success stories that will encourage and enable a more balanced workforce amongst the professoriate. This study generated rich qualitative data through participative seminars and one to one interviews with professorial colleagues across the White Rose Universities. Preliminary findings indicate that masculine models of leadership pervade higher education cultures and it is these masculinities which most disadvantage the careers of women in the academy.

We know from existing research that there are three major drivers for tackling the under-representation of women at the top of HEI's. First; the overriding issue of social justice where embracing gender equality is simply the right thing to do and 'recognises that people are not treated equally and implies intervention to change institutions and society towards being more just' (Coleman and Glover, 2010) (p:7) (Doherty and Manfredi, 2010, Morley, 2011). Second; there are issues of equity and parity, to address gaps and inequalities in gender pay and opportunities (UCU, 2013, Davidson and Burke, 2011, Prosser, 2006) and third; economic and business reasons, whereby ongoing research (Desvaux et al., 2010, Peston, 2012, Phillips, 2012, Walby, 2011) shows that diverse leadership teams enable more successful organisations and suggests that companies with gender-balanced executive boardrooms are 56% more profitable than those comprising all-male Boards.

Universities are beginning to recognise the imperative of retaining and promoting women into leadership positions and are making some progress to improve the gender balance at the highest senior management levels. A number of drivers for change have now become apparent including the

Research Councils' positioning with respect to Athena Swan (as articulated in the RCUK expectations for equality and diversity document), and the requirement for Silver status to be considered for NIHR research funding pertaining to Biomedical Research Centres and Units (BRCs and BRUs). Moreover, higher education plays a pivotal role in the UK economy, having contributed £3.3 billion in 2010/11 to business thereby stimulating economic growth and contributing to public services and society (HEFCE, 2012). Through its 'thought leadership' role within the economy higher education is highly visible and brings a responsibility to model social justice (Jarboe, 2013). Thus, the under-representation of women at the top of higher education is a fundamental issue for UK society and its consequences have wider and more serious resonances for issues of 'equity and social justice and participation in public life' (Morley, 1999).

Nevertheless, it has been widely reported that the structure, culture and hierarchical arrangements of academia reproduce a particular system of gender relations that reflect a hegemonic position which privileges both men and masculinity (Acker, 2006, Bagilhole, 2007, Hearn, 2001). So much so that despite 'the growing body of theoretical and empirical studies on gender, work and organisations [universities] turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the developed insight when it comes to their organising processes and principles' (Benschop and Brouns, 2003) (p:195). More generally, gender relations and gendered and gendering organisational cultures have shown to produce 'the ideal employee' who is a 'disembodied worker' (Ford, 2006, Mackenzie Davey, 2008) and this suits masculinities best. Critically, masculine models of leadership flourish to the detriment of women's careers.

So, at all levels of an organisation, right from 'the top', creating a culture which embraces plurality and difference is bound to be more equitable for women and will result in a culture that is fairer for all (Bagilhole and White, 2011) which will in turn engender excellence within the organisation. Both women and men benefit from equitable representation of women at the top and a healthy diversity of senior teams strengthens the effectiveness of senior leadership especially within the current economic climate where building leadership capacity is centre-stage (Davies, 2011).

Finally, more plurality and difference can be achieved in part by engaging women in senior appointments because without a critical mass women at this level will always seem 'silent and strange' (Houle, 2009) and be perceived as the deviant from the norm, or as a token rather than influential body that can effect change. Research evidence suggests that only when there are at least three women on a leadership team of ten will their contribution be recognised and respected (Butler, 2013, Chesterman and Ross-Smith, 2006 , Erkut et al., 2008, Osmond, 2009). And the presence of women in numbers is essential for attracting more women to similar roles, hence the relevance of 'critical mass', and that it is women in senior roles that is most critical (Ely, 1995). Despite this, recent research is exploring women's resistance to becoming the critical mass (Clarke and Knights, 2014, Morley, 2013a) and this paper sheds some light onto women's lived experiences of the barriers and challenges faced by them which may be stimulating such resistance.

In summary, this paper seeks to highlight the seriousness of the absent talent in higher education leadership and how this lack of plurality and difference in the professoriate is limiting the sector's ability to reconsider and refashion itself for a sustainable future. Ultimately the findings from the research are informing this empirical paper which argues for alternative models of leadership if diversity is to be achieved, recognised and rewarded across higher education.

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