Women professors as intellectual leaders (0157)

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Abstract

Leadership in higher education is most often scene in the lens of formal management positions, with informal leadership being somewhat overlooked. However, this paper's purpose is to add to the growing literature to a form of informal leadership: intellectual leadership. To that end, it's objective is to learn how women professors view and apply their role intellectual leaders. By using semi-structured interviews, this paper creates an autobiographical, inter-generational analysis of how women professors foster future leaders in higher education. The preliminary results indicate that professors perceive the job of being a professor in one of four orientations: academic citizen, public intellectual, knowledge producer or boundary transgressor.

Objectives and background

The paper explores the role of professors as intellectual leaders. Specifically, it focuses on the role of women professors as intellectual leaders. Women account for 21.7 per cent of the UK professors (Equality Challenge Unit, 2014). This gender inequality has been characterised as a significant deficiency in higher education leadership (Morley, 2013). Since most professors in research-intensive universities do not possess a formal management portfolio (Macfarlane, 2012), little is known about how professors, and specifically women professors define and practice their roles as intellectual leaders.

Until recently, the literature on leadership has focused on those with a formal managerial function or role (e.g. Bright and Richards, 2001, Knight and Trowler, 2001, Smith et al., 2007). This has made some sense. The university has faced multiple changes in the recent past. Massification has led to larger student numbers and eventually an expansion in university numbers. However, these numbers and a shift in opinion as to whether higher education is a public or private good have led to decreased government funding (Carpentier, 2012). Neo-liberal economic policies have forced universities to be more entrepreneurial in finding resources and led to greater competition (Marginson, 2006). In addition, globalisation has led to universities competing with their foreign counterparts for international students and faculty. These changes have led to a more professional management structure, though with

some hybrid roles (Whitchurch, 2006). With these changes, the literature that addresses the academic profession has focused on how the profession has fared. There has been a sense of embattlement among the profession (Enders and Musselin, 2008). The number of new academic positions has not kept up with the increased student numbers has been coupled by an oversupply of PhD graduates (Kim, 2010). Job dissatisfaction and stress have increased (Shin and Jung, 2014).

While the literature analyses leadership structures and their impact on academics in general, there is little on informal leadership of senior academics with professorial titles. Tight's (2002) analysis of the professor's role and purpose is a rare exception. The term and the role is somewhat fluid between countries, universities within a country and even between disciplines (Evans et al., 2013). For this study, the term 'professor' is being used in a UK context, equating to 'full professor' in North America. Tight (2002) identified that professors often lead in what may be termed academic citizenship (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997), by helping less experienced colleagues develop by mentoring. In addition, professors may represent the university in respect to its wider societal purposes as public intellectuals (Macfarlane, 2011). Despite this informal and distributed leadership, professors are not thought of as strategic leaders. This has been exacerbated by the managerial culture that has taken root in universities. While some professors do gain a managerial role, as a faculty chair, dean or higher in a sort of 'multi-professional' or hybrid role (Whitchurch 2006), their influence mainly comes from their managerial rather than academic positions (Macfarlane, 2011).

Rayner et al (2010) revealed that the literature is scarce on a professor's leadership role, though noted that they possess a sense of being intellectual leaders. Macfarlane (2011) defines this as one who influences based on the inspiration and power of ideas as opposed to fear. This leadership form is widely perceived to be the most effective means of developing the next generation of leaders (Ryan and Peters, 2015).

Whilst work has emerged in recent years on professors as leaders there has been comparatively little research on how women professors define and practice their role as intellectual leaders. The underrepresentation of women in the UK professoriate means it is important to consider this as one of the important 'absences' in university leadership (Morley, 2013).

Hence, in an effort to expand upon this burgeoning theme, this paper's research question is:

What ways in which women professors define and exercise their role as intellectual leaders locally, nationally and internationally?

Methodology

This paper draws primarily on 20 semi-structured interviews with professors based in the UK. 15 of these interviews are with women professors while the remaining five are with male professors. The male professors are a control group to help determine if there is a gender divide in intellectual leadership. The professors are based in a diverse group of UK universities from research-intensive to teaching-intensive institutions. The participants have also been chosen to represent both STEM and non-STEM disciplines. The interviews' purpose "is to obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 1996, p. 30-31). Their intent is to reveal and explore nuanced descriptions of the participants' viewpoints (Kvale, 1996, Cohen et al., 2011).

In order to add a biographical perspective to the interviews, an academic CV analysis are conducted prior to the interviews. CVs have been used as a complementary method for a number of years (e.g. Dietz et al., 2000, Canibano et al., 2008). "A CV provides vital information in support of narrative work" (Bawazeer and Gunter, 2016, p. 2). Thus CVs are a useful tool in learning about career paths and what may impact research productivity and career progression (Gaughan and Ponomariov, 2008, Bawazeer and Gunter, 2016).

Preliminary findings and discussion

This paper provides a greater understanding of the roles of women professors as intellectual leaders. Preliminary results show that women professors see their roles in four general orientations: academic citizen, public intellectual, knowledge producer or boundary transgressor drawing on Macfarlane's (2012) theoretical model. Academic citizens are primarily interested in applying their discipline to benefit university communities and/or the wider public and a number of women professors, particularly in disciplines with fewer female peers, see themselves as having a particular responsibility to help address gender inequality in the professoriate via active mentoring. Public intellectuals also engage the wider public, but they are not bound by discipline whilst knowledge producers seek to further theories and knowledge through producing research in their discipline. Boundary transgressors seek to challenge existing discipline boundaries and build new sub-disciplinary fields.

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