

Why universities can't see women as leaders

On International Women's Day 2017, it is sobering to acknowledge that still, just a fifth of UK higher education institutions are headed by a female vice-chancellor. And nothing's changing very fast.

Though the percentage of women appointed to lead universities is creeping up - between 2013 and 2016, 29% of new VC recruits were female – [the net gain has been negligible](#).

It's not, sadly, as if higher education is a particular outlier – just 10% of FTSE 100 companies are led by a female CEO, a quarter of the current cabinet are women, and if we're talking national newspapers, a paltry 20% of editors are female.

But in a publicly-funded educational setting that has been explicitly committed to equal opportunities for decades now – and with at least equal numbers of men and women studying for degrees – what is stopping highly capable women taking half the seats at the top table?

Male pressure

At the Teesside University, Azrini Wahidin, associate dean for research and innovation, points to prevailing expectations: women, she says, continue to be pushed early in their career towards roles that require them to do mostly teaching and administration rather than research, “because it is easier for managers to apply pressure on women, who will comply, than on male individuals, who will refuse”.

Wahidin recalls being “told by a man who wasn't as qualified or as experienced that I was over-ambitious”. She says she has seen “bright and talented women being overlooked for promotion, dissuaded to apply for promotion. And when women show an awareness of their developmental needs, they are refused access to courses and opportunities that would help them move to the next stage of their career.”

Another knotty issue is what counts as leadership experience in applications for senior roles. Pulling in substantial grants and managing big research teams doing time-consuming projects is very highly valued. But that presents an almost intractable problem for

many ambitious women who have at some point opted to go part-time.

Long hours

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“Everyone I know who has done extremely well in higher education has at some point done very long hours: 80-100 hours a week. And obviously if you have other interests outside of work then that’s difficult,” observes Professor Shân Wareing, pro vice-chancellor for education and student experience at London South Bank University.

Early “gendered” decisions to specialise in say, human resources, rather than taking responsibility for departmental finances, may also have long-lasting impact on your career potential, she notes.

“I have sat in rooms with equal numbers of senior men and women and thought, ‘oh, this is nice’. But the women are head of library and head of student experience, and the men control the money, the buildings and the research contracts.”

Wareing also points to the [unconscious bias](#) that even diverse appointment boards can bring to their decision-making. It’s a problem that has been noted when universities ask executive search agencies to create shortlists for senior roles.

“I think we need to be much more flexible in our ideas about what senior leadership looks like,” Wareing says. “My experience of interview panels is that they prefer confidence to self-awareness, and value quick results over decision-making that takes into account minority views and opinions. The latter takes longer, and I suspect doesn’t look like leadership to some people.”

[A 2014 report, Gender and Higher Education Leadership](#) by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, which runs the women-only [Aurora leadership programme](#), backs this view. Worryingly, women’s experiences pointing to gender bias in senior recruitment “were supported by comments made by some of the nominating managers” the report observes.

Recognising leaders

“We ought to recognise there is more than one way of showing that we’ve got it,” says Professor Jenny Higham, principal of St George’s,

University of London. When women are sidelined into more nurturing, student-facing roles “which are phenomenally time-consuming, they work equivalently hard and they make equivalent contributions” to men in positions traditionally recognised as leadership roles. What women do is rarely perceived as demonstrating leadership, and this needs to be challenged.

Appointment boards, Higham says, must become more thoughtful, and do more of a “read-across” of skills, experience and expertise when considering female applicants for senior roles.

Vijaya Nath, director of leadership development at the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, says that the problem is not limited to disparity in top flight appointments, but starts lower down the career ladder. “If you want to make it possible for women to achieve their potential, you need to develop more women further down who can then feed up,” she says.

At the University of Liverpool, where Professor Janet Beer is vice-chancellor, considerable work is going on to persuade women to take up leadership roles in their 30s, when so many drop their hours. “The thing I say is that leadership actually gives you more control of your work-life balance,” says Beer.

Liverpool vice-chancellor Janet Beer: ‘Leadership actually gives you more control of your work-life balance.’

Forcing a change

In Beer’s first year as VC at Liverpool, nearly all applications from women for internal promotions were successful, which was partly due to the support given at the pre-application stage. After years of listening to capable women weary of waiting for change, Beer has gone out on a limb by declaring publicly that she supports quotas. University boards should appoint 40% minimum “of each gender,” she suggests. Even as VC she can only advocate for the policy to her own university board, but at Ucas, where Beer is a trustee, she says the 40% principle has been embraced.

It seems that while there are certain strategic career decisions female academics need to be aware of early on, battling covert discrimination and hidden bias is a fight that can only be taken on at institutional level.

If prejudice has hampered women like Wahidin – who has always pursued her research full-time – then it is hardly surprising that female academics who opt for more flexible working find it so hard to be considered as senior leaders.

And if only the hardest, most exceptional – and most fortunate – women are able to overcome the unspoken prejudice that blocks the route to leadership, then higher education's top table will soon look even more antiquated than it currently does.

- Professor Liz Barnes has been officially installed as vice-chancellor of Staffordshire University today, in a celebration at Stoke Minster timed to coincide with International Women's Day.