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Gender imbalance in senior positions in higher education: what is the problem? What can be done?

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ABSTRACT

Global scholarship has documented gender discrepancies in power in higher education institutions (HEIs) for several decades. That research is now supported by wider gender equality movements such as those concerned with unequal pay and sexual harassment. Underlying these is the under-representation of women in senior management and full professorial positions. Thus, for example, in the US and the EU men make up the overwhelming majority of those in senior management (Rectors/ Presidents/Vice Chancellors) and in full professorial positions. Variation within and across countries and types of institutions suggests that it is necessary to go beyond explanations for this at the individual level. Drawing on research in the sociology of education; higher education studies; management and leadership studies; gender studies; science and policy studies, and using quantitative data, experimental studies, individual case studies and comparative qualitative studies of HEIs, this article focuses on three discourses which legitimate the under-representation women in senior positions namely excellence, fit and national relevance. It evaluates interventions to deal with this including unconscious bias training, mentoring, gender mainstreaming interventions such as Athena SWAN and ADVANCE and 'nudging' leaders to end gender inequality. It concludes that a fundamental transformation of HEIs is required and suggests ways forward.

Introduction

Global scholarship has documented gender discrepancies in power in higher education institutions (HEIs) for several decades. That research is now supported by wider gender equality movements concerned with sexual harassment (reflected in the 'Me Too' campaign), unequal pay and the kinds of individual experiences in HEIs documented as 'The Awakening' in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2018). Underlying these various phenomena is the stark reality of the under-representation of women in senior positions in public HEIs (whether in senior management or at full professorial level). Thus, for example, in the EU28 men make up 79 per cent of heads of HEIs (i.e. Rectors/Presidents/Vice Chancellors) and a similar proportion in full professorial positions (EU 2016). In the United States (US), 70

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per cent of College Presidents are men, rising to 90 per cent when attention is focused on doctorate graduating institutions, as compared with 80 per cent in the EU 28, rising to 85 per cent in doctorate graduating institutions (ACE 2017; EU 2016). Similar trends have been documented at the full professoriate level, where in the US men account for 68 per cent of tenured professors, with again a higher proportion at doctorate graduating institutions, as compared with 79 per cent in the EU28, which in this case does not differentiate by type of institution (National Centre for Education Statistics 2016; EU 2016). In the US, in all categories of institutions, female full professors earn less than their male counterparts (Catalyst 2017). Similarly, in the US, as indeed in Europe there is evidence that women advance slower and are less likely to be promoted relative to men (Long and Fox 1995; Fox 2008; Osborn et al. 2000; Rees 2007). Indeed, regardless of the country, the discipline or the rank, men are disproportionately selected relative to their number in the base recruitment pool in HEIs (Osborn et al. 2000). Furthermore, the under-representation of women in senior positions persists despite the increasing proportion of women employed as academics and despite the fact that within competitive higher educational systems, women are frequently the high academic achievers. Suggestions that this represents a short-term 'pipeline' problem are challenged by similar patterns in the non-academic area, where women are over-represented in lower paid positions but are still under-represented at the top (HEA 2016).

The general tendency for those in the most senior management and academic positions in HEIs to be men indicates the importance of such institutions in providing ideological legitimation for the persistence of organisational structures, cultures, policies, procedures and practices which are created by men for men. They ultimately reflect and perpetuate masculinist constructions of credentialised knowledge. The under-representation of women reflects the fact that the existing structure and culture is created by men for men. Universities/doctorate graduating institutions are most important in maintaining such legitimacy, and hence most likely to be characterised by gender imbalance at senior management and professoriate level. In that context, the gender profile of Presidents in the Ivy League colleges in the US (June 2017) and the leadership shown by, for example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT 1999) and the University of Cambridge (2018) in tackling aspects of this problem are particularly significant.

Explanations for the under-representation of women in senior positions frequently focus on the individual. Thus, women are presented in rather essentialist and binary terms as not interested in career advancement and/or as making caring choices which limit such advancement (Ceci and Williams 2011). However, these views are challenged by national variation in the proportion of women in senior management positions in HEIs. Thus, for example, more than half of Rectors/Presidents/Vice Chancellors in Swedish public universities were women in 2015 (Peterson and Jordansson 2017), whereas there has never been a woman at that level in an Irish public university (O'Connor 2014). Similar variation can be found at the highest academic level (viz full professorial positions: White and O'Connor 2017). Individual-level explanations are also challenged by increases in the proportion of women in senior positions in specific universities over limited time periods (White and O'Connor 2017; O'Connor 2017a; Wroblewski 2017). Nevertheless, within and across countries, women are more likely to head up HEIs which are not doctorate-granting institutions (EU 2016; ACE 2017; O'Connor 2014). These

patterns implicitly challenge explanations for the under-representation of women which focus at the level of the individual. They also implicitly challenge the usefulness of 'solutions' which remain at the level of the individual.

There are of course issues at the level of the individual which reflect 'the psychological effects of living in a sexist society' (Husu 2001, 38). Nevertheless, it is suggested that it is necessary to go beyond this level (O'Connor et al. 2015). Hence the first section of this article focuses on three discourses which are part of the institutional framework which creates and legitimates the under-representation women in senior positions viz. excellence, fit and national relevance. For Morley (1999) 'Discourses form the academy and are, in part, formed by it'. They reflect 'dominant systems of meaning ... that foreground particular perspectives' (Allan, Iverson, and Ropers-Huilman 2010, 2). They shape the context within which policies are framed. Excellence has become a 'hooray word' used to legitimise decisions about recruitment and promotion. Perceived suitability or 'fit' is a less pervasive and less overt legitimating discourse (albeit one that is very common in countries such as Spain where loyalty and familiarity are valued). Less work has been done in deconstructing gendered notions of national relevance, which is explored in the third section. This focus on such legitimating discourses implicitly challenges popular individual solutions such as unconscious bias training and mentoring, which together with mainstreaming initiatives are critiqued in the second section on the Evaluation of Interventions.

Leadership has often been defined as a process of influence (Gunter 2010; Sinclair 2014) and its role in creating or inhibiting gender equality is widely seen as critical (LERU 2018). Such leadership, exerted by those in formal positions of power, can perpetuate or challenge taken-for-granted legitimating discourses such as excellence, fit or national relevance. In addition, a policy commitment by such leaders is required to establish a framework within which gender equality can be prioritised. Organisationally focused interventions such as Athena SWAN or ADVANCE Institutional Transformation projects offer possibilities. However, they depend on committed leadership to re-envisage the nature and purpose of HEIs and to create space and structures to support this re-envisioning. This includes a recognition of the gendered nature of knowledge and of the embedding of masculinist constructions of that knowledge and related structures and cultures. With a small number of notable exceptions (see Wroblewski 2017; Peterson and Jordansson 2017), such re-envisioning by leaders in positions of power has barely begun to be discussed.

This article draws on a range of literature from the sociology of education; higher education studies; management and leadership studies; gender studies; science and policy studies and social psychology. It draws on research in those disciplines using quantitative data, experimental studies, individual case studies and comparative qualitative studies. It deals with trends in a wide range of countries including Sweden, Denmark, Austria, the US, Australia, etc. Some specific examples are drawn from an Irish context, where I have been involved in making policy recommendations, the purpose of which was 'to be disruptive of the status quo and to force the pace of change' (Quinlivan 2017, 72). Current indications are that these recommendations will be adopted by the state, although the extent to which HEIs will actually implement them, and hence their impact on the underlying discourses, remains unclear. This reflects wider difficulties with policy implementation in Ireland (OECD 2012).

Legitimating discourses underpinning evaluative processes and practices

A legitimating discourse refers to beliefs or concepts which are used to explain and ulti-
mately justify a particular outcome. This article is concerned with those used to explain
the under-representation of women in senior management or academic positions in
HEIs using the concepts of excellence, fit and national relevance. This focus reflects the
idea that a key element in challenging inequality is 'deconstructing the ideologies under-
pinning the system' (Lynch 1992, 193), since policies constructed within dominant,
accepted meaning systems implicitly or explicitly maintain the status quo (Ropers-
Huilman, Reinert, and Diamond 2017).

Excellence

Excellence is typically presented as an objective standard against which individual appli-
cations or CVs can be assessed in evaluative contexts such as recruitment, promotion or
research funding allocations. At an international level, it has implications for the Research
Excellence in Science and Technology indicator used to rank the performance of EU states,
to establish priorities and to allocate funds (Ferretti et al. 2018). However, it is a proble-
matic concept and was recognised as such by Campbell (2018, 404) in an Editorial in
Nature. Excellence has been seen as a 'hooray word' (Whyte 2005), an 'idealised cultural
construct' (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 342); a 'macro-cultural' (Hallett 2010) or 'rationalised
myth' (Nielsen 2016a) which is widely used to legitimate evaluative decisions and to
obscure the gendered processes operating in such contexts. There is no agreement on
what excellence actually means since context is ignored. Case study data from HEIs in Bul-
garia, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Turkey showed that variations in the definitions of excel-
lence emerged among the respondents (Wolffram et al. 2015; O'Connor and O'Hagan
2016). Complexities arose because of the difficulty of identifying thresholds and balancing
within and between evaluative criteria (for example, quantity versus quality in research;
excellence in research versus teaching).

It has been recognised that it is necessary to 'challenge ideas about the gender neu-
trality of the social construction of *excellence* and *merit*' (italics in original: Rees 2011, 9).
Excellence is socially constructed as masculine. Activities which women are seen as 'natu-
rally' better at (such as undergraduate lecturing or pastoral care) are typically undervalued,
with the more prestigious high-profile tasks most likely to be allocated to men (Carvalho
and Santiago 2010). Within the research area, a focus on the quantity rather than the
quality of publications incorporates an implicit male bias, since women are more likely
than men to have disrupted careers, due to child care and family responsibilities. At an
even more basic level, the majority of those involved in the construction of definitions
of excellence are men (as full professors, chairs of research funding bodies, peer reviewers
of prestigious journals, etc.: Husu and de Cheveigné 2010). In the US women were more
likely than men to say that they did not understand the criteria for advancement, particu-
larly to full professor (Fox and Colatrella 2006; Roth and Sonnert 2011). The existence of an
inclusive organisational culture was the strongest predictor of understanding such criteria
for women but not for men (Fox 2015).

The practices involved in the operationalisation of the concept of excellence are also
affected by gendered informal power dynamics i.e. micro-politics. For van den Brink

(2010, 25) micro-politics refers 'to the strategies and tactics used by individuals and groups in an organisation to further their interests. They include a broad spectrum of ways in which people influence, network, collide, lobby, resist or use other personal strategies to effect or resist change or to assert their own interests' (see also Morley 1999). They involve informal power and refer to actions, relationships or perceptions that undermine so-called objective evaluations. O'Connor et al. (2017) identified masculinist micro-political practices including cognitive bias (the devaluating of women as women) reflected in double standards in evaluating their CVs: so that 'despite good intentions and a commitment to fairness, both men and women are likely to undervalue women's accomplishments' (EU 2012). Moss-Racusin et al. (2012) found that in a US research-intensive university, in an experimental study, both male and female applicants when presented with identical CVs, favoured appointing the male candidate and at a higher salary than the identical female candidate (see also Shelzer and Smith 2014). There is some evidence that such bias is heightened where there is little accountability (Foschi 1996, 2004, 2006); when the criteria are ambiguous and the definitions of success narrow; where women are in a minority position and where related artefacts are culturally associated with the dominant group (e.g. technology being associated with masculinity: see Correll 2017; Rees 2011). The role of the chair, who is typically a senior positional leader, is extremely important in challenging such gender bias in evaluative contexts. They play a key role in encouraging reflection in the case of male and female applications which are borderline and in setting the overall culture of the evaluation committee (O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016; Correll 2017).

A double bind where evaluations of competence and likeability are associated positively for men but not for women has also been identified (Correll 2017). The depiction of women as more 'communal' (helpful, concerned with the welfare of others) and less 'agentic' (ambitious, aggressive, self-confident, independent) than men has militated against their access to senior positions. Gender differences favouring male applicants have also emerged in letters of recommendation (Trix and Psenka 2003), i.e. in terms of length, adjectives used, 'doubt raisers' etc. Such patterns reflect and reinforce gender status beliefs (Ridgeway 2011) or gender schemas (Valian 1999, 2005) and culminate in 'misrecognition' of women (Fraser 2008) with men benefitting from a 'male bonus' or 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell 2005). This is a particularly important issue in publicly funded HEIs concerned with accountability (Deem, Hilliard, and Reed 2008).

In Europe, the positioning of HEIs is much less clear than the US. Hence global ranking systems are particularly important there (Hazelkorn 2015). Increasingly in neo-liberal contexts in HEIs, research achievements are key in evaluating candidates' excellence. Wenneraas and Wold's (1997) classic study identified gender bias as crucially important in affecting the allocation of medical research funding in Sweden. They found that the most productive women applicants were the only group of women who were judged by peer reviewers to be as competent as the least productive men. They concluded that 'a female applicant had to be 2.5 times more productive than the average male applicant to receive the same [scientific] competence score as he' (Wenneraas and Wold 1997, 3). Other work has demonstrated the shifting of criteria during the evaluation process to favour men, especially in the case of stereotypically male jobs.

The impact of stereotypical thinking (Martin 2006; White 2014) is also reflected in the fact that women are significantly less likely to be awarded research funding; with the

value of awards being typically much higher for male than female principal investigators (Head et al. 2013; Viner, Powell, and Green 2004). In the Nordic Spaces study, although projects led by women accounted for 45 per cent of those submitted, and just under 40 per cent of those assessed as excellent by a gender-balanced teams of experts, they constituted only 22 per cent of those funded. Thus, whereas male project leaders who applied had a roughly one in 12 chance of being successful, female project leaders had a roughly one in 35 chance of being successful. There was evidence of small but consistent gender biases in that study. They were reflected in the male-dominated composition of the steering group at the time funding decisions were made; in the deviation from the excellence list established by the gender-balanced group of experts; in the use of political factors (location but not gender) in deciding which projects were to be funded and in the (initial) allocation of the lowest level of funding to the only female-led group.

The Swedish Research Council, an independent government agency distributing state research funding, has been actively concerned with these issues since its creation in 2001 (Jacobsson, Glynn, and Lundberg 2007). It has monitored the gender composition of its evaluation panels and the gender of the research applicants, with the goal of ensuring that women and men had the same success rates and received the same average size of grants, taking into account gender differences in career age, citations, etc. Because of on-going unease about the failure to attain these objectives, equality observers were placed on research funding bodies to record the interactional processes involved in the perpetuation of gender inequality (Ahlqvist et al. 2013). They found that gendered group dynamics existed in some of these, with such dynamics facilitating the positive evaluation of applications from men and the devaluing of applications from women. Thus, for example, they noted that 'doubt raisers' were more likely in the case of female than male applicants. The Swedish evidence is particularly important since it suggests that gendered evaluative patterns persist even in national contexts promoting gender equality, with those in leadership positions being key in challenging or perpetuating such patterns.

In summary, there is considerable evidence that excellence is a gendered construction and that gendered processes are involved in its assessment.

'Fit'

Gender is now seen as 'an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction' (West and Zimmerman 1987, 130). In that context, perceived suitability or 'fit' has implications for access to senior positions and more generally for access to positions in particular HEIs.

Leadership positions are typically seen as gendered ('Think Manager, Think Male': Schein et al. 1996). Such stereotypes create considerable challenges for women in getting into and occupying leadership positions (Fitzgerald 2018; Morley 2013, 2014). The masculinist definition of the characteristics and behaviour of a leader mean women are wrong footed: if they behave like women they are not seen as leaders if they behave as leaders they are criticised as women (Burkinshaw and White 2017; Fitzgerald 2018). Burkinshaw (2015) suggested that leadership involved a performance of masculinities learned in and through communities of practice in HEIs. These communities initiated emerging leaders as novices, then as apprentices and (in some cases) as full members. Membership required 'fitting in' to these hegemonic masculinist communities. Members of these communities of practice 'are continuously "mobilising masculinities" which

exclude and disadvantage women' (Burkinshaw and White 2017, 5). Peterson (2018) shows that a shift in the leadership ideal took place over the 1990–2018 period in Sweden. Thus, whereas the majority of the 1990s advertisements for Rectors/Presidents/Vice Chancellors there included mainly stereotypical masculine words such as competitive, strong, tough, decisive and driven, by the 2000s more stereotypical female words were included such as cooperative, communicative, taking responsibility for issues related to equality, being a good listener, etc. However, feminine characteristics were added to, but did not replace the masculine ones: thus effectively favouring men and keeping women 'outsiders' in these male-dominated contexts, reflecting and reinforcing their lack of 'fit'.

There are additional pressures on women accessing or occupying such positions arising from their materiality (as reflected in their bodies and their clothes) in addition to the emotional and aesthetic labour involved in being an insider/outsider (Fitzgerald 2018; McKie and Jyrken 2017). Thus, in a context where power is seen as incompatible with femininity, senior women are seen as 'organisational transgressors', who have to reconcile an implicit or explicit demand to adjust to the masculinist male-dominated context; and at the same time 'to restore the gender order disrupted by their entrance'. This involves 'undertaking repair work and deploying strategies to mediate their femininity while at the same time mobilising their femaleness to engage in care work' (Fitzgerald 2018, 4). A further complication arises from the fact that women are frequently in female-domi-nated areas of the organisation: areas that are perceived as low status and not ones for the identification of future leaders (Morley 2013). There is also evidence that women are more likely than men to be put in leadership positions during periods of crisis (the 'glass cliff' phenomenon: Ryan and Haslam 2007) when the chance of failure is high: ulti-mately affecting women's perceived suitability for such positions.

Traditionally the holding of leadership positions in HEIs has been seen as attractive: a perception rooted in the greater financial rewards of such positions and their prestige. There is conflicting evidence as regards whether such positions are declining in attractive-ness (Peterson 2015; Blackmore 2007; O'Connor 2015). However, they remain elite pos-itions in terms of income; those who occupy them are relatively powerful internally although frequently relatively powerless in relation to the state or the market. There is some evidence that women are less likely to be committed to continuing in these pos-itions, in a context where their male colleagues, who are also in senior leadership positions, see them in terms not dissimilar to Kanter's ([1977] 1993) Iron Maiden archetype, i.e. as disruptive, confrontational, frightening, intimidating. Their female colleagues' view of them is rather different, i.e. seeing them as supportive role models and trailblazers (O'Connor 2015). In any case, women are a minority in these situations.

The 'inbreeding system' which has been identified in Spanish HEIs is an extreme example of micro-political processes operating in the local context (O'Connor et al. 2017) where cri-teria revolve around 'local fit' (Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez 2010; Sanz-Menéndez, Cruz-Castro, and Alva 2013; Vazquez-Cupeiro and Elston 2006). 'Inbreeding' reflects an unofficial and unwritten rule that each new member should be selected from the members of the internal dominant group (Montes López and O'Connor 2018). The most valued attribute is to 'be a good colleague'. Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez (2010, 36) found that in such con-texts the odds of getting tenure was increased the longer it took to complete a PhD and was reduced by spending time abroad – indicating prioritisation of loyalty and usefulness. Fur-thermore, the odds of getting tenure three years after a PhD 'are more than double for male

researchers than for their female counterparts' (34 per cent vs. 16 per cent). They found that such odds are particularly high in predominantly male areas such as engineering. Thus, inbreeding appears to be a mechanism for directly and indirectly perpetuating male advantage by facilitating their access to positions in HEIs.

The importance of 'local logics' (Grummell, Lynch, and Devine 2009) or 'departmental fit' is a less extreme variation of this. Because of the vagueness surrounding the content of excellence, criteria can in practice be moulded to facilitate local candidates who 'fit'. In the case studies of HEIs in Bulgaria, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Turkey, men were more likely than women to refer to this: reflecting other evidence that women are more likely to focus on objective criteria. Evaluators, who typically were in leadership positions, were more likely than candidates to refer to fit: arguably reflecting their greater experiences in an evaluative context and the perceived legitimacy of 'fit' as a criterion for recruitment/progression (O'Connor et al. 2017). In institutional contexts where those in senior positions are most likely to be men, these processes are arguably likely to favour men.

van den Brink and Benschop (2011, 2012) in the Netherlands; Nielsen (2016a, 2016b) in Denmark; and Husu (2007) in Finland have referred to the practices implicitly or explicitly associated with 'fit'. Thus, in a context where women do better in open competitions, although full professorial positions were meant to be advertised in the Netherlands other than in exceptional circumstances, this did not happen in roughly two-thirds of the cases (van den Brink 2010). In Aarhus University in Denmark just under half of the full professor vacancies had only one applicant (Nielsen 2016a). Unhelpful practices such as narrow (and gendered) criteria and internal male lobbying as regards the framing of public advertisements were identified. Mechanisms varied between disciplines. Thus, for example, in recruitment in the natural sciences women lost out in the final stage because they did not fit the stereotypical image of the ideal scientist; in the medical sciences there were structural issues involving closed recruitment practices in which women were systematically overlooked because of stereotypical views about being a manager; while in the humanities, the key issues involved access to male-dominated sources of information and sponsorship (van den Brink and Benschop 2012).

O'Connor et al. (2017) also identified another micro-political practice, involving individual relationships of nepotism or cronyism which distorted the evaluative process. Such individual relationships with those in leadership positions were seen by both candidates and evaluators as important. Male evaluators, who typically occupied leadership positions, were again particularly likely to refer to them, arguably reflecting their experiences in evaluative contexts and the perceived legitimacy of these practices. In such cases, informal relationships, rather than any objective assessment of the applicants' merit were perceived as crucial. Such relationships were referred to as nepotism by Wenneraas and Wold's (1997) but have tended to be redefined (and made more respectable) by being called sponsorship, i.e. using influence with senior position holders to advocate on behalf of applicants (Ibarra, Carter, and Silva 2010, 82).

Cultural explanations for women's underrepresentation have focused on organisational cultures that are unfriendly or unhelpful to women (Deem 2003; Morley 2013). In predominantly masculinist structures and cultures, maternity can signal a lack of fit (Lynch, Grummell, and Devine 2012). Since domestic and caring responsibilities are disproportionately carried by women, this lack of fit can persist beyond the birth of children. The requirement in many western societies (supported by the EU) for researchers to be

geographically mobile at post-doctoral level poses particular challenges for women since these expectations coincide with the peak child bearing and rearing period.

To a degree which is rarely made explicit, research project membership (which is important for career advancement) reflects the decision of the project leader or principal investigator (PI) to include particular people in the team drafting the research funding application, thus effectively setting them up to be selected, even if there is a competition for the position once funding has been achieved. The tendency for PIs to be senior (male) academics at professorial level in large funded projects means that through processes such as homosociability (i.e. the tendency to select people like oneself: Grummell, Lynch, and Devine 2009), female post-doctoral students may be less likely to be involved in research funding applications, reflecting and reinforcing their lesser likelihood of being included in project teams, with implications for career advancement. The attitude of the PI to gender equality in general, and maternity in particular, is crucial (O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016). If a project leader's attitude to gender equality is negative, homogeneity on other dimensions (e.g. discipline, location, etc.) is more likely (O'Connor and Fauve-Chamoux 2016), with negative implications as regards innovation (EU 2012).

In summary, issues related to women's suitability or 'fit' in a masculinist male-dominated contexts cause difficulties for women in accessing and occupying senior positions in such structures: a pattern that can be perpetuated or challenged by those in senior leadership positions.

National relevance

HEIs exist in a wider nation-state context and this affects perceptions of their purpose, and their priorities. Brown (1992) refers to the state's ability to define what policies are in the 'national interest'; while Franzway, Court, and Connell (1989, 18) refer to 'the dispersed apparatus of social control which works as much through the production of "dominant discourses", i.e. ways of symbolising and talking about the world, as it does through naked force'. Such discourses are reflected in and reinforced by structural arrangements: with those that are seen to reflect 'women's interests' being peripheral; and women and their work being typically seen as less central to societal, economic or social well-being (Connell 1994).

That state context globally is one which is predominantly male: with men occupying three quarters of all legislative seats in political institutions around the world (Celis and Lovenduski 2018). The extent to which the state is historically (Connell 1994) or inevitably (Mckinnon 1989) patriarchal is contested. It can be argued that male-dominated structures do not inevitably prioritise men's interests. However, Walby (2009) found that in the US the states with the highest representation of women introduce and pass more priority bills dealing with issues about women, children and families. In HEIs, which are themselves male-dominated at senior management and academic level, masculinist tendencies are reinforced by state structures, policies and priorities: one where women and their activities are seen as less relevant to the national interest. Establishing a policy commitment to gender equality by creating a framework which challenges such structures and constructions of national relevance is a key task of national and organisational leaders.

The limitations of a simple focus on the gender profile of evaluative boards are clear (although it is important in reducing 'symbolic violence': Bourdieu 2001). EIGE (2018)

has developed a tool to assess the gender sensitivity of the legislative arm of the state looking not only at its gender profile and measures to facilitate women's access to it, but also at women's ability to influence it (as reflected in their leadership of political parties and chair of key committees) and at the extent to which women's interests and concerns have space on the parliamentary agenda (as reflected in a dedicated equality body; in the content of Strategic Plans, in gender budgeting and structures to hold executive bodies to account). In this context, gender equality is incorporated into the structures and policies of the organisation. In the absence of this, masculinist policies, structures and budgets are depicted as gender neutral and what women are confronted with is not structures and policies that represent 'men's interests' as against women's' but ones 'as if men's interests are the only ones that exist' (Pringle and Watson 1990, 234).

The OECD (2004) has considerable reservations about the ability of research in limited areas of science and technology to deliver economic growth. However, under the impact of neo-liberalism, disciplinary areas that are seen as closest to the market are prioritised, i.e. science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM: Slaughter and Leslie 1997, 2001; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). The majority of staff in these areas are men, while the areas that are devalued (such as humanities) are those where women academics are most likely to be found. Thus, in the US as indeed Ireland and in many other countries, these male-dominated areas are seen as having national relevance: 'Scientific progress is considered to be in "the national interest"' (Fox 2008, 76). There is a good deal of evidence that neoliberalism is contributing to the re-masculinisation of HEIs, compounded by processes such as isomorphism and policy diffusion and as reflected in the increased emphasis on competition for research funding and increased research output; in the devaluation of teaching; in masculinised forms of control; in continued bench-marking of women against male norms; in the pressure on women to become part of a male-dominated organisational culture; and in the gendered career practices of academics themselves (Hey 2011; Thornton 2013; Lynch, Grummell, and Devine 2012; O'Hagan et al. 2016).

In Ireland, modelled on the US and with strong ties with the US science-industry complex (O'Connor 2014), structures such as Science Foundation Ireland were specifically created by the state outside the academy to advocate for science (narrowly defined) and for the allocation of research funding to it. There were no similar state-funded institutional structures created to advocate for other disciplinary areas or to challenge the narrowness of the definition of 'national interest' implicit in this focus or to highlight its gendered character (O'Connor 2014). Insofar as disciplines with predominantly male academic staff (such as 'hard science', engineering or information communication technology) are seen as more relevant to the 'national interest' than predominantly female areas (such as education, nursing or midwifery), then more professorial chairs and research funding will be available in the former than the latter areas. This has consequences both for specific individual's careers and more broadly for women's opportunity to compete for senior positions and research funding in those areas where they are most likely to be located.

The differential gendered impact of national resources in general, and more recent austerity measures in particular, on the gendered definition of disciplines that are of national relevance, needs to be further explored. Even less attention has been paid to the impact of national research funding structures on constructions of national relevance. For example, in Portugal and Norway, researchers from different disciples compete within one large national research funding 'pot'. In Ireland, this competition

for funding only occurs in the context of the Irish Research Council which receives only four per cent of the total research funding (with the overwhelming majority of other 'pots' being for male-dominated areas: HEA 2018). Such arrangements reflect and reinforce constructions of national relevance: often with the explicit or tacit support of those in senior leadership positions in HEIs.

The national relevance of particular (male-dominated) disciplines is very clear in the context of neo-liberalism. The implications of this for the under-representation of women in senior positions needs further exploration.

Evaluation of interventions

The idea that gender equality is good for scientific quality (Rees 2011; see also Mavin and Bryans 2002) is literally unthinkable in many evaluative contexts. Clear criteria and transparent processes are helpful but not sufficient in reducing bias (Foschi 1996, 2004, 2006; van den Brink, Benschop, and Jansen 2010). Thus even in situations where 36–42 key performance indicators were identified, it was clear that gendered bias came into play (O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016). Lamont (2009) has suggested that since evaluations involve a social process and since gendering is a social reality it is impossible to eliminate that bias. Goldin and Rouse (1997) showed the impact of auditioning members of top orchestras behind a screen and in bare feet on their gender profile – but whether this kind of anonymity could be used in evaluating academics is unclear. The 'gender blinding' of funding applications by the Irish Research Council (2016) and its positive impact is an attempt to emulate this. The difficulties of measuring excellence in a way which does not involve gender 'misrecognition' (Fraser 2008) raises fundamental questions about the discourse of excellence. Discourses involving 'fit' have been rehabilitated by a focus on sponsorship, but their link to nepotism makes them problematic. Those involving national relevance are part of a taken-for-granted reality. All can be perpetuated or challenged by those in senior leadership positions in HEIs.

Some of the most popular interventions in dealing with gender bias in evaluative contexts have focused at the individual level, particularly unconscious bias and mentoring. Part of the attractiveness of the former arises from the implicit suggestion that no-one is to blame. Online questionnaires such as the Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html) have been developed to enable individuals to assess their own levels of unconscious bias and stereotypical thinking. For individuals whose identity involves ideas of fairness and who are open to the possibility that they may inadvertently be differentially evaluating male and female applicants, these online instruments can be useful. In real life situations bias is affected by context (Girod et al. 2016) and particularly the extent to which Rector/President/Vice Chancellor and other line managers create an organisational culture which values diversity, challenges stereotypical evaluations and puts in place structures to develop and implement relevant policies. However, there is evidence that 'the correlation between implicit bias and discriminatory behaviour appears weaker than previously thought … and that there is very little evidence that changes in implicit bias have anything to do with changes in a person's behaviour' (Bartlett 2017, 2; Greenwald, Banaji, and Nosek 2015; Oswald et al. 2013, 2015).

Another popular strategy involves the mentoring of women. Mentoring has traditionally been understood as a relationship between a more experienced mentor and a

younger, less experienced individual, which helps the younger person to develop their career. It has been seen as 'giving feedback and advice' (Ibarra, Carter, and Silva 2010, 82). Thus, mentors act as a sounding board, offering advice as needed and support and guidance as requested (Rhodes 2002). Frequently the implicit assumption is that if only women were more like men, there would be no problem, i.e. if they had more confidence; marketed themselves more; did not make unhelpful lifestyle choices, etc. then gender imbalance would be eliminated. Thus, mentoring typically becomes part of a 'fix the woman' approach. De Vries and van den Brink (2016) using the metaphor of a bifocal approach suggest that in a context where those occupying formal positions of power are providing mentoring and have at least some structural awareness of gender inequality, mentoring can promote organisational change. It is rare however that mentoring occurs in these contexts: typically individual mentoring arrangements are completely detached from any structural engagement with power or any systemic awareness of gender inequality.

In a context where there are relatively few female role models, in masculinist structures and cultures, providing 1:1 mentoring for women can be useful to individuals (Buell 2004; Young et al. 2004). Women mentors excel at offering personal support, friendship, acceptance and counselling. However, women are under-represented in the most senior positions and relying on them as mentors reproduces stereotypical gendered patterns. Informal mentoring relationships appear to be more effective than formal relationships, but this may be due to self-selection (Ragins and Cotton 1999). A key challenge is to involve male mentors and to challenge the homosociability which has been reflected in their tendency to mentor men. At a more fundamental level, mentoring typically leaves the gendered structures and cultures untouched. Ibarra, Carter, and Silva (2010) suggested that women are over mentored and under sponsored. Even if sponsorship is made equally available to men and women (a considerable challenge given the part played by identification and homosociability) it is an individual solution which leaves gendered structures and cultures intact.

A culture which allows for challenges to the enactment of biases may be reflected in the presence of dedicated gender specialist observers on panels/boards. Ahlqvist et al. (2013) found that having such observers in evaluative processes was useful in highlighting gendered bias. Alternatively, this role can be played on a rotating basis by senior managers, who also standardise and monitor the amount of time allocated to discussing each candidate (Correll 2017). This is potentially an even more effective strategy since it avoids the risk of marginalisation. There have been a number of helpful videos produced exemplifying many of the gendered evaluative practices identified in the literature (e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g978T58gELo). There have also been attempts to recognise the gendered forces which inhibit the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives. Peterson and Jordansson (2017) focus on the erosion of bases of male power – particularly discipline and space. Measures such as the cascade model (i.e. ensuring that the proportion of those promoted is the same as that in the level below (HEA 2016)) are also useful. Quotas are frequently seen as problematic in contexts where the system is not seen as implicitly privileging (some) men. There is evidence that men are less likely than women to see gender inequality as existing in HEIs or less likely to see it as extremely important (Currie, Thiele, and Harris 2002; HEA 2016), and hence are more likely to see any attempt to level the playing pitch as unnecessary. However, a number of countries (such as Spain) award

additional points to projects directed by a woman or which have a higher than average representation of women on the project team (O'Connor and Fauve-Chamoux 2016).

Gender mainstreaming initiatives are an attempt to integrate gender equality into the structures, processes, policies and practices of organisations, including the curriculum and research projects. Such mainstreaming 'does not address the exclusion of women as a 'repair task' but as an organisational task … It demands a change in perspective because the powerful actors in the university question what they *themselves* (italics in original) do to either exclude or welcome women into the university' (Müller 2007). There are two well-known attempts at gender mainstreaming: Athena SWAN and ADVANCE.

The Athena SWAN Awards, which were initiated in the UK, are a gender equality initiative to recognise HEIs (or parts of them) that successfully embed gender equality policies and practices into the normal activities of the organisation. In the UK the linking of institutional Athena SWAN Awards to the ability of individual researchers to apply for medical research funding (Barnard 2017) increased their salience. In Ireland, the acceptance by the three major funding agencies (The Irish Research Council; Science Foundation Ireland and the Health Research Board) of the recommendation that researchers could only apply to them if their host institution had achieved Athena SWAN institutional awards (HEA 2016) had a similar effect. These awards initially focused only on academics in STEM but have more recently been extended to all disciplines as well as to non-academics. Barnard (2017) noted that even in those departments in the UK which received the highest Athena SWAN award (i.e. gold) there was a relatively little emphasis on change at senior level; and even where it existed the focus was largely on encouraging and training women. Thus, the implicit assumption was that women, not the organisation were 'the problem'. Such awards have had very little impact on the proportion of women at a professorial level in STEM in the UK – the area that they were initially directed at (although the proportion of women at that level in non-STEM areas increased). The possibility of rhetorical compliance (i.e. box-ticking) cannot be eliminated.

ADVANCE, a research programme in the US specifically directed at the institutional transformation in science and engineering embeds and fosters committed gender aware leadership as a key element in promoting organisational transformation. This differentiates it from Athena SWAN (despite their similarity in terms of data-based decision making; focus on infrastructural resources, planning and monitoring). Both raise awareness of gender and attempt to tackle the organisational culture. However, ADVANCE (Sturm 2006; Correll 2017) underlines the importance of supportive leaders in formal positions of power, who can recognise and challenge stereotypical thinking, diagnose biases in criteria and procedures and can hold each other to account at key points in the evaluation/recruitment process. Sturm (2006, 287, 289) calls these 'organisational catalysts,' i.e. 'They leverage knowledge, ongoing strategic relationships and accountability across systems'. They are 'accomplished scholars with administrative experience within the department or the university'. By virtue of their formal position, they have access to various kinds of knowledge and networks that can facilitate change at the organisational level. They can become national mediators of institutional change, collaborating with their counterparts in other institutions to develop best practices and ultimately to transform the wider institutional context.

The Institutional Transformation ADVANCE programme has been shown to be extremely effective in some cases, for example, increasing the proportion of women scientists

more than threefold over four years in the University of Michigan (2001–2005); in reducing the use of gender stereotypes in evaluative contexts (Correll 2017); in changing the organisational culture and increasing appointment of heads of department and deans (both men and women) who are sensitive to diversity and organisational culture (Sturm 2006). ADVANCE is characterised by its focus on organisational transformation and the use of academics who occupy senior positions of power and who are committed to ending gender inequality as organisational catalysts. This contrasts with Athena SWAN where the project leaders are typically at a lower level (and sometimes in Human Resources).

Gender mainstreaming is also the conceptual framework for existing policy approaches in Austrian HEIs and is embedded in the legal context (Rees 2007). In that context, HEIs are required to put in place a Working Group for Equal Opportunity. However, although theoretically a powerful watch-dog, with an ability to veto appointments, it is limited by the positions, career aspirations and disciplinary loyalties of those involved. Thus, although it does reflect and reinforce awareness of gender equality, its attempts to create equal treatment are typically frustrated in a context where ultimate responsibility rests with the rectorate, which typically lacks expertise in eliminating gender inequality. Thus, Ropers-Huilman, Reinert, and Diamond (2017, 210) highlight the 'misalignment between the power to effect change, knowledge related to equity and change efforts, and designated responsibility for addressing this "policy problem"'. This is a very common problem. In an attempt to tackle it the HEA Expert Group (HEA 2016) recommended that demonstrable experience of leadership in advancing gender equality be a requirement for appointment as President/Rector/Vice Chancellor and all line management positions. Thus, rather than selecting leaders and then trying to convince them of the importance of gender equality, the focus should be on recruiting those who have had experience of tackling such inequalities prior to their appointment. In a study of those at the top three levels of Irish university leadership (i.e. President, Vice-President and Dean) those who denied the relevance of gender or demonstrated an awareness of gender in stereotypical terms were most likely to be men. However, a sizeable group of men and women revealed a nuanced understanding of gender inequality, although only a very small minority had actually tackled it (O'Connor 2018). This may not be unrelated to the fact that although a focus on gender bias is seen as essential in successful women's leadership programmes (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2012) mainstream leadership development programmes typically ignore gender inequality (for example, Gurdjian, Halbeisen, and Lane 2014; Taylor 2016).

In any event, the importance of such leadership is reflected in the fact that, in the majority of the 11 case studies of public universities identified by local academics as exemplifying best practice in gender equality (in Ireland, UK, UAE, Sweden, Austria, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Portugal, Turkey) women made up roughly 40 per cent of those in senior management and roughly 30 per cent of those in the professoriate (O'Connor 2017a). The national policy context differed widely: but organisational leadership was critical. Recognising and valuing such leadership is important as is creating a context where those who have an awareness of gender inequality are 'nudged' to action (Thaler and Sunstein 2009). Thus, the linking of state funding to indicators of gender equality creates a context which 'encourages' action by those in such senior leadership positions to tackle it. Changes in individual HEIs can also 'nudge' systemic change. Thus, for example, in the Irish case study, an increase in the professoriate from

zero to 34 per cent over a 15year period (1997–2012) made it possible to recommend national quotas at full professorial level and to link these to the three-year funding cycle of HEIs (O'Connor 2017a; HEA 2016). At a more fundamental level, including previous work on advancing gender equality as a key criterion for appointment to all senior leadership positions in HEIs increases their responsivity to gender inequality.

Wroblewski (2017) has argued that rather than seeing increases in the proportion of women in senior positions as a cause of organisational change it should be seen as an effect. Thus, it is those organisations which have embedded gender into the nature and purpose of the organisation, and whose stakeholders embrace this, that male dominance of senior positions appears problematic. Underlying the movement away from the definition of the absence of women in senior positions as 'the problem' lies the question as to what constitutes success in gender equality terms (O'Connor 2017b). The European Research Area (EU 2012, 12) involving 34 countries has defined gendered success in terms of three pragmatic political goals: first, gender equal representation in all fields and hierarchical positions; second the abolition of structural and cultural barriers to women's careers; and third the integration of a gender dimension in all teaching and research contexts. Thus, although this includes women's equal representation in senior positions, it is not restricted to this.

For women's under-representation in senior positions to change there needs to be a re-envisioning of the nature and purpose of HEIs; a recognition of the way gender permeates all teaching and research contexts; a revaluing of female-dominated disciplines; a recognition that the male-dominated masculinist structure and culture, including the normalisation of male-dominated leadership and the 'think manager, think male' stereotype needs to change. Indeed, as in Wroblewski's (2017) case study what may be required may be no more and no less than feminist leadership and related structures and cultures.

Summary and conclusions

This article looks at discourses which explain and justify the under-representation of women in senior positions in HEIs viz excellence, 'fit' and national relevance and evaluates some of the interventions to deal with this issue. Underlying this is the idea that the under-representation of women in these positions cannot simply be seen as an individual phenomenon and that attempts to deal with it at that level effectively perpetuate the status quo. The article recognises that limited change is possible in the gender profile of Rectors/Presidents/Vice Chancellors and the professoriate. In some cases, this reflects the efforts of leaders in positions of power, while in others it reflects national leadership (e.g. in Sweden and Austria) that created structures which facilitated such change. Nevertheless, it is also clear that change has been slow, limited and open to reversals: reflecting the importance of HEIs in legitimating wider masculinist and male-dominated structures, cultures and constructions of valued knowledge.

Drawing on a wide range of literature, the article argues that embedded in each of the purportedly gender-neutral evaluative discourses (viz excellence, 'fit' and national relevance) are gendered constructions, which explain, perpetuate and legitimate the under-representation of women in senior positions in HEIs. Constructions of excellence and their operationalisation have begun to be challenged by research which has highlighted their masculinist bias and the masculinist micro-political practices involved in making evaluative assessments. It has shown that even in experimental studies in research-intensive

universities, both men and women favour CVs with male names over identical female ones. This raises fundamental questions about the devaluation of women and their achievements in predominantly male contexts and the extent to which it is possible to eliminate it.

The discourse of 'fit' has been shown to be gendered in the case of appointments at senior level, where women's bodies, clothes and caring responsibilities continue to be seen as marking them out as 'outsiders' who do not fit. Yet this discourse purports to be gender neutral and objective, while ignoring the homosocial personal ties of affection and loyalty that arise in male-dominated contexts, and their implications for perceived 'outsiders' such as women. This discourse which is arguably less legitimate than excellence in most HEIs is being rehabilitated by a focus on sponsorship, with the implied legitimacy of 'backing winners', 'talent spotting', 'fast-tracking future leaders', etc.

Critics of neo-liberalism have highlighted the prioritisation of disciplines close to the market at a national level and the implications of this. Others have highlighted the gendered consequences of neo-liberalism. The impact of a combination of patriarchal privileging and neoliberalism in constructing taken-for-granted purportedly gender-neutral constructions of national relevance and their implications for women's under-representation in senior positions in HEIs has been less discussed. The discourses of excellence and 'fit' further deepens its impact.

Two of the most popular interventions are unconscious bias training and mentoring. Both are attractive to organisations as ways of tackling this issue. Ultimately, however, they are limited. An attempt at mainstreaming gender through Athena SWAN, potentially offers a more fundamental approach. However, Barnard's (2017) conclusion that even departments in the UK winning the highest (gold) award, rarely tackle issues related to power at middle or senior level is significant. The fact that there was little increase in the proportion of women at professorial level in STEM in the UK at a time when this was the focus of Athena SWAN reinforces the perception that, in the absence of leadership which tackles the elimination of gender inequality at an organisational level, Athena SWAN can become a rhetorical box-ticking exercise. ADVANCE, while sharing many of the characteristics of Athena SWAN, builds in that element of such leadership by using those who are already in positions of power and tackling gender inequality and requiring that they submit and apply a theoretical model of how they propose to transform the institution to eliminate such gender inequality. The importance of this element is reflected in individual case studies (such as Correll 2017; O'Connor 2017a) as well as in cross-national comparative studies.

EIGE's (2018) tool for assessing parliamentary gender sensitivity could be usefully adapted to an HEI context. In particular its focus on women's opportunities to influence the structure and culture of the HEIs; on the creation of structures to ensure that women's interests and concerns have adequate space on the HEI agenda; a focus on cultural change to ensure that 'women's work' in general, and predominantly female disciplines, in particular, are perceived as just as valuable as 'men's work' and predominantly male disciplines; a focus on gender-sensitive budgeting and policies as well as other symbolic indicators of gender inequality could usefully be applied to HEIs. For this to happen senior leadership in HEIs is crucial, both in providing the policy commitment for such changes, and in ensuring that attempts to frustrate them are not effective. In the long run, recruiting leaders of HEIs on the basis of previous work they have done to end gender inequality is crucial. This reflects the fact that knowledge is gendered and that the creation and dissemination of such knowledge is a key function of HEIs, so that those who have not undertaken

such work should not be appointed to leadership positions. Creating contexts where those who have an awareness of gender inequality are 'nudged' to action (Thaler and Sunstein 2009) using various mechanisms is also an important strategy. In addition, there needs to be a re-envisioning of the nature and purpose of HEIs.

Unfortunately, there appears to be little appetite to move this forward within mainstream universities, although exemplars exist (Wroblewski 2017). Paradoxically, although a focus on gender bias is seen as essential in successful women's leadership programmes (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2012) mainstream leadership development programmes typically ignore gender inequality (for example, Gurdjian, Halbeisen, and Lane 2014; Taylor 2016). Thus, for many of those in formal leadership positions in HEIs (predominantly white, male, middle class, middle-aged) gender inequality is not a really important issue. Some have begun to register the ripples coming from campaigns such as Me Too and increasing pressure from the EU (2012) and the OECD (2012) as regards the impact of a lack of diversity at senior levels in HEIs on research and innovation. In that context, the embracing of transgender toilets by those in leadership positions in Irish HEIs is not coincidental. Such facilities, although important to individuals, keep the issue of gender at an identity level – and leave issues of power and resources untouched although they do challenge gender binaries. Such initiatives, together with mentoring and a box-ticking approach to Athena Swan, can be used to show the state and the EU that gender inequality is being tackled. However, they are very far removed from the kind of organisational transformation that needs to be embraced by senior leaders within those HEIs. The model of ADVANCE, combined with the EIGE (2018) tool are helpful in envisaging how real change might occur. No more and no less than a fundamental transformation of HEIs is required. The question as to whether leaders holding senior positions in HEIs are up to this challenge is still outstanding.

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