

Women Doing Leadership in Higher Education: Drawing on Individual Experiences to Analyse On-Going Gender Inequality in the Sector

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Abstract : Gender issues in higher education continue to represent a complex issue as institutions grapple with the role that organisations can play in combatting inequality. Schemes like Athena SWAN and the Aurora leadership programme in the UK context are attempting to tackle some of the issues around representation and the recognition of women in the sector. This paper is the first of its kind in reporting findings from a mixed-methods longitudinal study on both professional services and academic women in higher education in the UK. Online surveys have been completed by over 2,000 women in the sector. The qualitative elements include interviews with women and their mentors, and diaries with a select group of women. So far results have shown that contrary to the stereotype of women lacking leadership skills or having no desire to go into higher roles, women in the sector consistently assessed their leadership abilities positively, especially but not only regarding interpersonal interaction and facilitation. Over 80% of women agreed that they felt confident about putting themselves forward for positions of responsibility at work. However, qualitative data shows that confidence remains a salient term for how women talk about the challenges they have faced at work. This suggests that the work needed to challenge systemic gender issues requires action to be driven above the individual level. Overall, academics reported more negative experiences than professional services staff. Similarly BAME women's responses are more negative. Therefore, the study offers some information on the differential experiences of women. In conclusion, women in higher education are undertaking considerable 'below the radar' leadership activities in what they perceive to be a somewhat inhospitable hostile workplace culture. The significant amount of effort expended in the sector is affecting slow, partial impacts on gender inequalities.

Keywords : gender, higher education, leadership, longitudinal research

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