

Chapter 5: Pat O'Connor

‘Changing the gender profile of the professoriate: An Irish case study’. In K. White and P.O'Connor (eds.) *Gendered Success in Higher Education: Global Perspectives*. Palgrave MacMillan, pp91-110

Abstract

This chapter analyses the success of a new university in increasing the proportion of women professors from zero in 1997 to 34% in 2012, considerably above the average for Irish (21%) and European Union (21%) universities. This focus is an important symbolic indicator in the context of the entrenched male dominated character of universities. Drawing on documentary and experiential evidence the chapter highlights the importance of formal leaders and informal gender champions and the synergies between them. It highlights the importance of ‘managing management’, leveraging prestigious external funding, ‘perverse alignments’, cross-institutional ties, ‘provocative misbehaviour’ as well as the support of formal leaders and chance in facilitating this increase. It concludes that change in the gender profile of the professoriate is possible but not inevitable.

1 Introduction

The male dominated character of university leadership internationally is reflected in the overwhelming majority (80%) of heads of higher educational institutions in the EU being men (EC 2016). Overall, four fifths of those in senior management positions (i.e. President, Vice-President and Dean/Director) in Irish universities are men (O'Connor 2014a). The gender profile of those at (full) professorial level is remarkably resistant to change over time and space (Husu 2001). Roughly four fifths of those in full professorial positions in the EU and in Irish public universities are men (EU 2016; HEA 2016a). This under-representation of women can be seen as a form of ‘symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely misrecognition)’ (Bourdieu 2001, pp.1-2). Thus it feels ‘natural’ to expect those at professorial level or in senior management to be men. Stereotypes equating

men with power and women with deference and caring seem unproblematic with implications for the expected profile of those who create, transmit and apply knowledge and even more importantly those who define what is valued as knowledge (O'Connor & O'Hagan 2015).

In the Irish case study university the proportion of women in the professoriate increased from zero to 34% over a 15 year period (1997-2012) with no affirmative action or financial incentives. Increases of a similar scale are rare internationally. In Austria, with a great deal of legislative, organisational and financial support, the proportion of women at professorial level increased from 10% in 2000 to 23% in 2015 (Wroblewski 2016). In a Turkish university there was a similar increase from 16% in 1994/95 to 32% in 2009-2010, with part of that period coinciding with female organisational leadership (Saglamer 2011).

In attempting to explain the dramatic increase in the case study university the focus is on leadership within a particular national and organisational context, defining leadership as 'a process of influence' (Gunter 2010, p. 527). This definition includes the 'top down' leadership of those in formal positions of power as well as the 'bottom up' leadership of informal gender champions. The wider societal and organisational context was important in terms of timing and chance, the latter being defined as a sequence of events that defy obvious causality or agency (Gabriel et al. 2014, p. 336).

2 Organisational context and methodology

Ireland is a small country of 4.76 million people with seven public universities. Ultimate responsibility for the development and implementation of higher educational policy rests with the government as a whole and particularly with the Minister for Education and Skills and his/her department. The Higher Educational Authority (HEA) is the funding authority for universities and has statutory responsibility for policy development and wide advisory and monitoring power, including equality obligations under the Universities Act (1997). The case

study university is a regional public university with roughly 15,000 students and 1,400 academic and non-academic staff. It is one of three relatively young public universities in Ireland, achieving university status in the late 1980s. It was initially an institute of higher education, with a strong industrial orientation (Walsh 2011).

Professorial positions in the case study university (CSU) are well paid, and are overwhelmingly on a common salary scale (with virtually automatic annual salary increases). As in the UK and Australia, the position of full professor is at the apogee of a five step academic hierarchy of permanent positions. Professorial positions are typically publicly advertised with the appointment board being chaired by the President of the CSU. As such he effectively has a great deal of influence on who is appointed. Hence ultimately the gender profile of the professoriate reflects his attitude to gender. There has never been a female President of this or any other Irish public university.

The proportion of women at professorial level increased in all Irish public universities from 5% in 1975/76 to 21% in 2015 (this increase was not linear; it fell in the 1980s (O'Connor 2014b)). There is considerable variation between universities in the proportion of women at this level, ranging from 13-31% (averaging 19% over 2013-15 (HEA 2016b)). Such variation implicitly suggests that organisational factors are important. In 1997, as in 1993/94, there was no woman at full professorial level in the CSU (across all public universities the proportion was 4%). By 2012 the case university was firmly established as a leader in the area and has maintained that position.

The perspective used in this chapter is a feminist standpoint one (Stanley & Wise 1993), which underlines the importance of situated knowledge. The methodology used is a reflective one, using the success case study model. The data sources were both documentary and experiential. The former included a number of contemporaneous documents related to the position of academic women in that university (including briefing documents, data from

Human Resources and the Higher Educational Authority (HEA), conference papers and publications, as well as secondary sources (Fleming 2012; Walsh 2011)). In addition, drafts of this paper were presented internally and externally (including to colleagues who were active inside the CSU and other universities). The experiential element is based on perceptions and reflections over a 24-year period. That positioning was initially as course director in women's studies and as one of a small group of informal gender champions (1992-97). In 1997 the author was the first woman to be appointed at (full) professorial level in the CSU and in 2000, the first woman to be appointed as faculty Dean, being re-appointed by two other Presidents over the period 2,000-2010 inclusive. As an insider/outsider it was fraught with tension and can be seen as that of a 'tempered radical' (Myerson & Scully 1995) committed to the objectives of the university, but convinced of the need to challenge the gendered organisational culture (see also Peterson 2014). An increase in the proportion of women at professorial level in the faculty during the author's tenure as Dean (from 13% to 43%), prompted a critical reflection on the factors that facilitated and limited such developments across the university.

The advantage of a single case study is the opportunity it offers to understand a phenomenon in depth. Its disadvantage is in relation to generalizability. Focusing on a university context in which one is involved raises further challenges but it has been used by among others Goode and Bagilhole (1998); Kloot (1994) and Webber and Jones (2011). Issues about validity of the data cannot be avoided: 'validity in interpretative social science is complicated by subjectivity' (Mabry 2008, p. 221). However, Hammersley (2008, p. 51) noted that in assessing the validity of research findings: 'Judgement is always involved and this necessarily depends upon background knowledge and practical understanding'.

3 The wider national context

Legislation relating to gender equality was enacted in Ireland (largely under pressure from the European Commission/European Union) from the 1970s onwards. Recent legislation includes the 1998-2008 Equality Acts and the 2000-2011 Equal Status Acts. The OECD (2012) noted that although Ireland performs well in passing legislation, it is poor at implementation. Maternity leave has improved since it was first introduced in the early 1980s, but funded child care is limited and extremely expensive. Nevertheless, particularly during the period of rapid economic growth from 1997- 2007 (dubbed the Celtic Tiger years) women's participation in paid employment increased dramatically before falling slightly in the subsequent economic recession. By 2016 the gap between male and female employment rates was in Irish terms, relatively low - 70% for men versus 60% for women (QNHS 2016). The extent of the change which had come about is indicated by the fact that the ban on married women working was only lifted in Ireland in 1973, with 62% of the women in 1971 indicating on the census form that their main occupation was home duties (O'Connor 1998).

Up to the 1960s only 5% of the cohort went on to higher education and among the rest, girls had higher educational levels than boys, a pattern which has persisted. By 2013 women constituted 58% of professionals and 31% of managers, directors and senior officials (CSO 2014), albeit mainly at lower levels. Indeed nearly a quarter of women in employment are in professional occupations, as compared to 15% of men, a pattern that reflects the high cost of child care combined with the predominant allocation of child care responsibilities to women. These patterns have been associated with substantial increases in the proportion of women in academic positions in the Irish university system (i.e. from 20% in 1993/94 to 49% in 2015), with broadly similar trends in the CSU, from 15% in 1993/94 to 45% in 2015 (O'Connor 2014b; HEA 2016b)).

3.1 Timing and chance: National legislative and policy context

The Universities Act (1997) marked the overt endorsement by the Irish state of a managerialist agenda, and it increased the power of the President as the chief officer. The Act also included among the functions of a university ‘to promote gender balance and equality of opportunity among ... employees of the university’ (1997, 11:12k). It required the President to prepare a university policy in these areas (1997, 36:1b). The HEA was given an advisory and review role to promote gender balance among university staff, to prepare gender equality policies and to monitor their implementation (1997, 49). Thus a legal framework was created which necessitated a focus on gender. The strengthening of the power of the President potentially provided a mechanism to achieve this.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the national policy context as regards gender equality in higher education was relatively positive. The HEA established the Higher Education Access and Equality Unit at University College Cork in 1989. The Department of Equality and Law Reform (1994: 74) identified equality as ‘one of the main aims of educational policy’. Lindsay (1993, pp. 5-6), Chairperson of the HEA and former Secretary of the Department of Education, concluded that: ‘we may and I think must, consider what the Americans call affirmative action necessary to redress these inequalities’. Time specific targets were legal and appropriate under the Employment Equality Act (1998:24 (1)), and were used as part of the strategic management process in the Civil Service in the late 1990s (Humphreys et al. 1999). Largely due to pressure by the European Union, the state endorsed gender mainstreaming from the late 1990s; however, McGauran (2005, p.1) found basic failures in its implementation. She concluded (2005, p.87) that the resistance to mainstreaming ‘certainly suggests the operation of patriarchy in the system’. Male ‘champions’ did exist, although they were rare. Within an organisational and societal context that provided little support for their position they were subjected to teasing and ridicule (for example about ‘turning into a woman’ (McGauran 2005, p. 99).

Neo-liberalism both during the Celtic Tiger (1997-2007) and the economic recession (2008-2014) provided an opportunity to dismantle the national equality infrastructure (Lynch et al. 2012). In 2002 the HEA closed the Higher Education Access and Equality Unit. Responsibility for gender equality remained unallocated within the HEA until 2014. Thus although the HEA (2004, p.60) accepted the recommendation of its own task force that ‘Effective action needed to be taken by universities to deal with the gender imbalance in higher staff positions’ it took no action until 2016. It even failed to publish data on the gender breakdown of academic staff by level between 2004 and 2012. The state’s own regulation as regards 40% gender representation on public bodies such as university governing authorities was also ignored until 2016. As in other countries (Morley 2003) a focus on quality, accountability and governance which might have generated a concern with gender did not do so (O’Connor 2014a). The Hunt Report (2011) outlining educational policy to 2030 made no reference whatsoever to gender. However, Atlantic Philanthropies (a major source of Irish university funding) was supportive of a gender equality agenda in universities from the mid-1990s. The EU (2012) highlighted the issue of gender inequality and its negative implications for research innovation. Although the legislative framework existed, the national context was generally unhelpful as regards the promotion of gender equality at staff level in Irish universities during the period 1997 to 2012.

4 Organisational leadership

Leadership occurs in a context. The case study university was a new university, one which prided itself on its pioneering and innovative role in higher education, was characterised by multi-disciplinarity, the structural separation of the position of head of department from a professorial position and a tradition of work in women’s studies. The focus here is on exemplary actions taken by informal gender champions (mainly women) and by four (male) Presidents and other senior managers (both men and women) over a fifteen year period which

directly and indirectly contributed to a dramatic increase in the proportion of women at professorial level.

4.1 *Informal gender champions*

Throughout the late 1990s in several Irish universities there was a very active programme of academic activities, including undergraduate and post graduate programmes, national conferences and publications in women's studies. In the CSU this tradition of teaching and research in women's studies dated back to the 1980s when that area had received European Skills funding. Celebration of International Women's Day was organised by academics and Women in Engineering bursaries were initiated within that faculty. In the 1990s extra-curricular activity was paradoxically facilitated by a small amount of annual dedicated funding made available by the HEA possibly under pressure from Atlantic Philanthropies. In the 2000s, with Atlantic Philanthropies funding, dedicated women's studies posts were created and located in humanities (specifically in english) and in social science (specifically in sociology). These positions became nodes for the mainstreaming of gender within the academic curriculum. Resources (including post-doctoral fellowships) were allocated to other departments with varying levels of success in embedding a gender focus in these disciplines.

Gender equality in the case study university emerged as a key issue for women's studies faculty and students in the mid 1990s (Richardson 1997). From then on a small loose group of people, mainly women, played a key role in 'managing management' (Bendl & Schmidt 2012) by framing gender issues in a way that made them a priority for management. Informal gender champions relentlessly raised gender as an issue in a wide variety of fora over this period. As a new secular university, the founding President was particularly sensitive to comparisons with a university whose mandate was the training of roman catholic priests. It was pointed out to the President in a Governing Authority meeting that there were no women at professorial level

in both universities. This led to an invitation from him to identify ‘the most effective practical steps the university can take within the law to address the matter of recruiting and promoting a greater proportion of females’ (O’Connor 1996, p.1). At the initial meeting with him in 1996, 15 short term and five medium term (five year) strategies were identified.

Informal monitoring of recruitment and promotion data was done by gender champions from the mid-1990s onwards. It showed that, for example, the highest position occupied by any woman in 1994 was senior lecturer (and only 4% of those at this level were women). Structural opportunities in the CSU were identified and highlighted. As a new university there were greater opportunities there to create professorial positions than in older universities. The numbers of those in full professorial positions over the 1993-2012 period increased 2.7 times in the case study university (from 18 to 50), as compared with an increase of 1.6 times (from 317 to 512) across the overall public university system. A similar structural opportunity existed in another new university but it was not grasped.

Informal gender champions were also active in getting research grants and hence generating data and legitimacy for a gender agenda. In 2007 a Science Foundation Ireland Application (SFI) was successfully made for a Gender Audit of Science and Technology. The fact that this funding was from the most prestigious science research awarding body in Ireland enhanced its importance. The data which emerged showed the existence of gendered processes at national level with women being less likely to be external research examiners, keynote/plenary addressees, assessors for grant giving bodies, members of editorial boards and appointees to national/international bodies; while at organisational level women were less likely to be members of appointment, promotion and policy related boards and more likely to be on internal ‘housekeeping’ committees (Richardson 2013). Such patterns are not unique (Gazali et al. 2013). In the CSU this evidence was presented to executive committee.

In 2001 following a successful application for five years' funding for women's studies, an invitation emerged from Atlantic Philanthropies to apply for funding to 'deliver higher levels of female representation at the more senior levels in the university' (Jordan & Richardson 2001, p. 6). A female gender champion from science and engineering and the male head of Human Resources identified a target of 20% of women at senior lecturer level, measures to ensure that promotional, recruitment and finance allocating structures would include at least 40% women, that the number of positions held by women on faculty and university committees would be proportional to the percentage of eligible women, and that the practice of hiring in overwhelmingly male areas at a higher level than those in female areas would be ended. However, the successful application largely focused on training and development for women; that is, 'fixing the women' (Morley 2013).

Other strategies used by informal gender champions included activating cross-institutional ties between those involved in women's studies in the pursuit of collective objectives and engaging in individual provocative behaviour internally in the CSU. Strong personal relationships between the gender champions and the four Presidents over the 1997-2012 period were useful in avoiding marginalisation. Such relationships also allowed processes such as homosociability; that is, selecting people like oneself (Lynch et al. 2012) to be named and awareness generated about them.

4.2 *Formal leadership*

The focus here is on exemplary actions taken by four male Presidents and a small number of other male and female managers over a fifteen year period in directly or indirectly advancing

the gender agenda, sometimes in alliance with informal gender champions and sometimes on their own. The process was dynamic, with reversals at different times and at various levels.

The implementation of The Universities Act (1997) required that equal opportunity structures be created. An equal opportunity committee was set up in 1998 chaired by the Vice-President Academic and Registrar, with the expertise of the gender champions being needed and valued in that context. However, over time its composition was changed and it voted itself out of existence in January 2012. In addition, an equal opportunities sub-committee of Governing Authority, created in the late 1990s, was disbanded by the then President in 2005 with faculty equality issues assigned to the human resources committee.

The difficulties of developing and enacting gender sensitive policies within a masculinist organisational culture emerged clearly in the late 1990s during 35 working party meetings on the promotion policy before it was approved by Governing Authority in November 1997. The equal opportunities policy went through a similar process before it was approved by Governing Authority in May 2000. A reference to gender representation was included in both policies and was interpreted to mean that only one woman needed to be included on boards (which might also include up to 12 men). There were no penalties for non-implementation and the policy was breached the year after its approval. An attempt to highlight this culminated in an invitation to meet a disciplinary committee consisting of all the layers of (male) line management who had signed off on the all-male board. The purpose of the disciplinary hearing was to intimidate and no further disciplinary action was taken.

From the 1990s onwards there were several 'unusual' appointments which increased the number of women at senior level. They included the appointment of the first woman at full professorial level in the CSU by the founding President. The second President appointed another junior woman to the newly created post of Dean of Teaching and Learning. He also

appointed the first woman faculty Dean in 2,000. In 2008, under the fourth President, the six faculties were reduced to four and two of the four faculty Deans appointed were women. Gender representation in the most senior management team rose to a third for a short period of time in the 2000s, before falling to two out of nine. The Dean of the increasingly feminised Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences became an advocate for gender issues inside and outside the university (Fleming 2012). This raised awareness, but also resistance. Thus for example a vote was taken at management committee on one occasion to prohibit the presentation of any comparative data that might indicate male privileging. However, the increased visibility of women in senior positions implicitly challenged stereotypes.

A three year appointment of an equal opportunities manager reporting to HR (funded by Atlantic Philanthropies in the mid-2000s) started a process involving the increased involvement of HR in gender equality. From 2007 a ‘perverse alignment’ (Newman 2013, p.212) emerged between those interested in promoting managerialist quantification of procedures and feminists who were interested in promoting transparency in recruitment and promotion processes. Criteria and marking schemas relating to them began to be routinely identified before the interview. On the other hand, in the context of managerialism, HR became increasingly focussed on the corporate image of the university. International Women’s Day underwent a process of corporatization. In the final report to Atlantic Philanthropies by human resource staff, exceeding the achievement of the gender target of 20% women at senior lecturer level was seen as much less important than corporatist processes (Daly & Healy 2008). Within five years, in the context of an increased focus on key performance indicators, the increasing proportion of women at professorial level became a corporate trophy.

The decision by the third and fourth Presidents to compete for a community based medical school had unexpected gender consequences for the CSU. It occurred in the context of an increasing proportion of women doing medicine - because women were out-performing men

in state examinations - and in a context where special funding arrangements created an opportunity for appointments in medicine to be at professorial level. By 2012 the existence of the medical school had increased the proportion of women at full professorial level by 9% in the CSU (although two thirds of those at professorial level in that area are men). Under the (female) Dean of Education and Health Science (EHS) the number of women at professorial level in that predominantly female faculty more than doubled between 2009 and 2012, increasing that area's share of professorial posts from 20% to 33%, with the proportion of professorial posts in the predominantly male Science and Engineering faculty falling from 58% to just under 40% (HR 2013).

Each of the Presidents, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, publicly endorsed a gender agenda. Thus, for example, at the specific instigation of the first President, a search process with a view to encouraging applications from women was initiated in the 1990s. He also initiated gender awareness training for the executive. However due to political instability, reflected in the fact that although the normal tenure for a President was 10 years there were four Presidents between 1997 and 2012, gender awareness briefing for executive did not recur until 2014. In the interim and despite considerable pressure exerted by female senior managers at executive level, performance related gender indices disappeared from the university strategic plan (2011-2015) before it was launched.

5 Limits to and the sustainability of change

Despite a dramatic increase in the proportion of women at professorial level the structure and culture of the case study university did not change dramatically over this period. In part this resulted from some ideas failing to get traction because of political instability. For example, in the initial 1996 briefing SMART (specific, measurable, achievable and time bound) targets

were to be identified related to staffing, to workshops to challenge negative and stereotypical gender attitudes, to gender balance on interview boards, and to greater profiling of women in career relevant activities. Similarly, short-term strategies (1996) such as the appointment of an equal opportunity manager at senior level outside HR reporting directly to the President, the formulation of action plans by line managers, gender auditing of training and travel budgets and mechanisms to sanction breaches of procedure/reward compliance failed to get traction. From a position when the university had two cross university equal opportunity committees, by 2015 it had none. Access by faculty to data for monitoring gender change has become much more difficult. Even yet, ostensibly transparent marking criteria are routinely adjusted by interview boards on the day of interview, after sight of candidates' applications, thus increasing the possibility of bias (Valian 2014).

Despite the high proportion of women in the professoriate, the university is now one of only two universities to fail to meet the required 40% gender representation on Governing Authority (only 20% are women). There have been no sanctions from the HEA for this poor performance, nor has it attracted widespread negative comment internally. Furthermore the proportion of women on executive committee has failed to increase since mid-2000 and at 22% is below the national average (HEA 2016b). Across the university as a whole the proportion of those at (full) professorial level has decreased slightly (from 34% in 2012 to 31% in 2015), in contrast to several other universities which are increasing, albeit from a lower base.

In the CSU a successful application was made for cross national EU Framework 7 funding (2012-17 FESTA) premised on the assumption that gender inequality was an organisational issue. European funding for gender action and research projects in three universities, including the case study university, led to the mobilising of the support of the HEA and the other universities for the national rolling out of Athena Swan Awards in Irish higher education in 2014 (i.e. a mechanism for recognising organisational commitment to advancing

women's careers in science, engineering and technology). Under the strong gender aware leadership of a male Dean of Science and Engineering in the CSU and in the context of FESTA and Athena Swan, the proportion of women at full professorial level in this area increased from zero in 2012 to 10% in 2015 (compared to 13% at EU level (EC 2015)). The case study university was one of only two Irish universities to achieve the Athena Swan Bronze Institutional Award in 2015, as well as two departmental awards in the Faculty of Science and Engineering. Nevertheless, although the 2015-19 strategic plan (2015, p.34) refers to exemplifying 'gender equality best practice in all aspects of our activities' and to reinforcing 'our position as the leading university in Ireland in terms of female representation in senior roles' it restricts the indicators of success to attaining Athena Swan awards, which currently only involves STEMM disciplines.

At national level grass roots activity by gender champions across several universities, combined with the taking of a successful gender discrimination case by Dr Micheline Sheehy Skeffington against the National University of Ireland Galway, culminated in a *National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education* (HEA 2016b), in which the author was involved. It adopted a systemic, radical, evidence-based and implementable approach. For example it recommended mandatory quotas at professorial level, demonstrable experience of leadership in advancing gender equality as a criterion in senior management appointments, with the gender profile of senior academic and non-academic staff being linked to finances received from the HEA (HEA 2016b).

6 Summary and conclusions

In this chapter the focus was on success in one HE context where the proportion of women at professorial level increased from the joint lowest in Ireland (zero) in 1997 to 34% in 2012.

Leadership, both by ‘top down’ positional leaders and by ‘bottom up’ gender champions, was seen as crucial in bringing this about in a national context that was for the most part indifferent to gender issues over that period, and an organisational context that changed little in terms of other indicators of gender equality. Gender equality was framed as key to organisational success by the informal gender champions who ‘managed management’, leveraged prestigious external funding, were involved in ‘perverse alignments’, activated cross-institutional ties in pursuit of collective objectives, challenged organisational practices by ‘provocative misbehaviour’, and supported positional leadership in moving a gender agenda forward. The development of the medical school was a Presidential initiative and had the unintended effect of impacting on the gender profile of the professoriate.

The chapter draws on both experiential and documentary evidence. Its limitations are considerable, drawing as it does on only one university, and from a limited perspective (i.e. the increase in the proportion of women at professorial level). This is however important in challenging symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001). In the Irish context it has also been useful in breaking down institutional complacency about the absence of women from the higher levels of the academic hierarchy and hence in facilitating the inclusion of radical recommendations in the *National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions* (HEA 2016b). The case study indicates that both kinds of leadership are important as are synergies between them and the wider context. The lack of change in the gender profile of other positions in the CSU is a sobering indicator of the limited nature of the change.

The absence of any overall organisational gender equality structure since 2012 in the CSU, the failure to include gender metrics in the most recent strategic plan (2015), and the slight decline in the proportion of women at professorial level may be harbingers of a less promising future. The implementation of the recommendations from *The National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions* (HEA 2016b) may provide a more

systemic and implementable impetus to change through linking gender equality indicators, including quotas at professorial level, to funding provided by the HEA.

Creating change in organisations is difficult, and creating gendered change is demonstrably more so. The case study shows that change can occur, even in intractable areas such as the university professoriate. Such change however is not inevitable, total or permanent.

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