

## Are universities still male dominated? What can be done?

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### Introduction

In Irish universities 74 per cent of senior academic positions are held by men (HEA, 2019a). This gives an implicit message to women students and early career women that they have no future in these organisations. It also has the immediate practical implication that there are few women in key decision-making fora in universities. This in turn perpetuates a male dominated system since people tend to appoint those like themselves (Lynch et al, 2012). Such a system is unhelpful in terms of innovation, research output and economic growth (EU, 2012; OECD, 2012) and is particularly unacceptable in publicly funded universities.

The purpose of the 20 professorial posts recently approved under the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) created by the Minister for Higher Education is to improve the representation of women in senior positions in the Irish higher educational system (HEA, 2019b). This is an important objective both symbolically and practically.

### Variation between men and women?

Women are the high academic achievers before and during university and they make up roughly half of those on the first step on the academic ladder but, for the most part, they do not move upwards. Figures released by the Higher Educational Authority (HEA, 2019a) show that women's 'chances' of accessing a professorship in Irish universities remain much lower than men's (1:13 for women as compared to 1:5 for men: Table 1). Assumptions that this simply reflects women's maternity leave, caring activities, lack of ambition etc are difficult to sustain in the face of variation between Irish universities: from 1:9 to 1:27 for women.

On average across the universities, change is happening in women's 'chances', but very slowly- improving from 1:16 in 2013-2015 to 1:13 in 2018 (HEA, 2017, 2019a). Variation between universities has been a consistent feature. Women's 'chances' of a professorship have been consistently lowest in NUI Galway: 1:27 according to the most recent data. This is surprising given the flurry of activity there in the wake of the decision of the Equality Tribunal awarding Micheline Sheehy Skeffington €75,000 following on

from her successful case (Equality Tribunal Report 2014) and the settling of the remaining four cases by the university in 2018.

Men's average 'chances' of a professorship at 1:5 show little variation between Irish universities (1:4 to 1: 6) and have changed little since 2013. This is very different to the much lower and much wider range of variation in women's 'chances' of a professorship. It is almost as if there is some underlying systemic consensus that men are more entitled to a professorship and that men's 'chances' should not be impacted on by increases in women's 'chances'. This idea is supported by the fact that increases in the number of professorships in the recent data have facilitated slight improvements in women's 'chances', while men's 'chances' have remained the same. Men's 'chances' (at 1:4) have been consistently highest in University College Dublin (see Table 1).

The pace of change is clearly important and since 2013 this has also varied between universities. It has been fastest in Trinity College Dublin where women's 'chances' of a professorship increased from 1:21 in 2013-2015 to 1:12 in 2018. The 'new' universities, such as Maynooth University and the University of Limerick had an initial advantage and this was reflected in their proportion of women at full professorial level in 2013-15. However, the pace of change in these universities since then has been slow. Indeed, the University of Limerick, which led the field in 2012, with 34 per cent of its professoriate being women, has not improved since then, while men's 'chances' increased there in 2018. This shows that progress is not inevitable and constant vigilance is necessary if back-sliding is to be avoided.

### **Variation across time and place?**

Of course, a minority of women have always accessed these positions: it was five per cent in mid 1970s, fell to one per cent in the early 1980s; rose to four per cent in the early 1990s; rose to 10 per cent in the early 2000s (O'Connor, 2015). By 2013-2015 it had risen to 19 per cent- and it is now 26 per cent. This suggests that the under-representation of women is not inevitable. However, that increase has not been linear- the early 1990s level being below the mid 1970s.

This under-representation of women in senior academic positions is not peculiar to Ireland. Across the EU, men on average also make up 76 per cent of those at full professorial level (Grade A: EU, 2019)- exactly the same as in Ireland. The assumption that such patterns reflect meritocratic decisions has been challenged, for example, by Van den Brink and Benschop (2011, 2012) in the Netherlands and Nielsen (2016) in Denmark. Drawing on a unique data set, Brower and James (2020) found that in New Zealand, using data from all academics in publicly funded HEIs, a man's odds of being ranked professor or associate professor were more than double a woman's odds, despite similar research scores, age, field and university.

Data in the Task Force Report (HEA, 2018b) suggested that Irish HEIs were not really taking this issue seriously. Thus, the cascade model i.e. where the proportion of women to be promoted is based on the proportion of each gender at the grade immediately

below (HEA 2016) was implemented by the universities and the institutes of technology, except at senior lecturer level- a critical gatekeeper level for accessing senior academic positions.

Since the 2016 *Expert Report on Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education* (HEA, 2016) there has been an increasing recognition in academia internationally that the under-representation of women in senior academic positions reflects an organisational culture that favours men, a lack of gender competence among managerial leaders, as well as structures, criteria and practices that facilitate men's successful application to these positions. These are part of the 'normal' taken-for-granted reality in higher education institutions (HEIs) and they perpetuate gender inequality. Ignoring these ensures that gender inequality will continue to exist in HEIs.

### **Solutions: Mentoring? Unconscious Bias? Athena SWAN? SALI?**

For the most part, in Ireland and internationally, interventions to promote equality are at the individual level (e.g. unconscious bias training, mentoring). These have limited effect (Wynn, 2020; Kalev et al. 2006; O'Connor 2018). They are however attractive to organisations since they implicitly assume that 'the problem is women' (O'Connor, 2014) and that the organisational structure, culture, practices and processes do not need to change. Even attempts at institutional transformation such as Athena Swan (AS), can be nullified by 'normal' gender inequality practises.

AS is a quality mark awarded at bronze, silver and gold level to institutions or departments based on their commitment to structural and cultural change as regards gender inequality. It initially focused on advancing the careers of women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and now includes all professional, support and technical staff, all disciplines, all genders and all intersectional inequalities. The approach involves quantitative data collection, self -assessment, data-informed decision making, planning and monitoring by a self-assessment team, under a chairperson, potentially at senior management level.

Following a recommendation made by the Expert Group in that area (HEA, 2016), all major research funding bodies made achieving an AS award by HEIs, within specified time limits, a condition for submitting individual applications for research funding. AS was seen by the HEA Expert Group as just one element in facilitating organisational transformation but it appears to be the sole focus for promoting gender equality in many HEIs.

It is too soon to assess the impact of AS as regards gender equality in Irish HEIs. However, evidence from the UK suggests that although AS created a context which made it easier to raise gender equality issues, and although it elicited positive responses from participants, it did not increase the proportion of women in senior academic positions i.e. at full professorial level (Graves et al 2019). Amery et al (2019) also found that there was no evidence that AS or the level of the award (i.e. bronze, silver or gold) had any impact on the gender pay gap. Graves et al (2019) survey of almost 3,000 staff

and students in institutions with an AS award showed that male academics were generally more positive about AS than their female counterparts. They also found that even in HEIs that had won an AS award, women were less likely than their male counterparts to be familiar with the criteria and processes for promotion; were less likely to see such processes as evidence based, unbiased and fair; less likely to have been encouraged to apply for promotion; less likely to be satisfied with their most recent performance review and less likely to be optimistic about their career prospects.

In addition, even in such AS award winning contexts, women were less likely than men to think they had adequate opportunities for training and development and were less likely to have been encouraged to take up such training opportunities as were available (although they were more likely to be mentored). This suggests that even in HEIs that had won an AS award, there was a persisting attachment to 'fixing the women' through initiatives such as mentoring, while at the same time ignoring informal gendered processes, criteria and practices which perpetuate gender inequality, including sponsorship (O'Connor et al, 2019).

Women did the bulk of the work in applying for AS awards (Graves et al, 2019) – with potential consequences for their individual careers. Even in such HEIs that had won AS awards, only just over half of the academic staff saw AS having a positive impact on the work environment or on work practices- with men more likely than women to see it in this way. This suggests that AS is useful in assuaging male anxieties surrounding the position of women in academia but not in seriously challenging male dominance and over-representation in senior academic positions.

Only a very small minority of departments in the UK receive AS gold awards. Case studies of those departments did show an increase in female representation at senior levels (Graves et al. 2019). However, it seems possible that this reflects particular departmental characteristics- possibly their very strong and positive departmental leadership and effective challenging of 'chilly' organisational cultures. Furthermore, even in them, academic men were more likely than women to be encouraged to apply for promotion and to be more optimistic about their career prospects. This shows the extent to which AS leaves 'normal' gendered processes and practices untouched, and suggests that, at least in the UK, it is not an effective tool for transforming the structure and culture of HE.

The Senior Leadership Academic Initiative is a way of speeding up the process of change by targeting posts at those areas where women are particularly under-represented. It is an attempt to deal with a system which was – and indeed still is – designed by men for men. This masculinist structure, culture, processes and practices needs to be tackled by gender competent leaders. The HEA Expert Group (2016a: 47) of which I was a member recommended that 'demonstrable experience of leadership in advancing gender equality' be a requirement for appointment to all line management positions, including President/Director. There is no evidence that this has happened.

## Summary and Conclusions

Men still make up 74 per cent of those in senior academic positions in Irish universities. Women's 'chances' of accessing such a position vary between universities: from 1:9 to 1:27. This strongly suggests that such under-representation cannot be simply explained in terms of maternity, child care responsibilities, lack of confidence etc. Men's chances on the other hand are much higher than women's (1:5 as compared with 1:15 for women) and vary much less (from 1:4 to 1:6) – suggesting a kind of systemic consensus as regards men's entitlement to such positions.

These patterns are not a-typical- but they are unacceptable in terms of research innovation, economic growth, social justice and future sustainability. Change is occurring: with the pace of change since 2013 being fastest in Trinity College Dublin. Many institutions seem to be pinning their hopes of change exclusively on Athena SWAN (AS). Evidence from the UK suggests that although this opens up discussions about gender inequality and although it is seen as positive by participants, and especially by men, it does not deliver in terms of increasing the proportion of women in senior academic positions and leaves man-to-man preferential informal practices intact.

Given the ongoing failure to recruit Presidents/Directors based on their gender competence, it is difficult to be optimistic that the pace of change will increase in the future. The Senior Leadership Initiative involving a total of 45 posts (less than ten per cent of the total number of professorial posts) will at least symbolically change the gender profile of those in senior academic positions. Whether or not this will change the system depends partly on the extent to which those appointed are committed to wider systemic change; on the extent to which those departments and disciplines which benefit from the allocation of these posts work for systemic change and, most importantly, on the extent to which the men in power co-operate with that change.

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**Table 1: Percentage of women at full professorial level in Irish universities 2018\*; 2015-2017\*\*; 2013-Dec\*\*\* and ratio of male and female professors to those below (rounded to whole number)**

	% of women at full prof level 2018 only	% of women at full prof: 2015-17 (2013-15)	Ratio of male full profs to those below 2018	Ratio of male full profs to those below 2015-17 (2013-15)	Ratio of female full profs to those below 2018	Ratio of female full profs to those below 2015-17 (2013-15)
<b>DCU</b>	30%	24% (19%)	1:6	1:6 (1:5)	1:16	1:19 (1:19)
<b>Maynooth</b>	28%	29% (23%)	1:5	1:5 (1:6)	1:9	1:9 (1:12)
<b>NUI Galway</b>	16%	12% (13%)	1:6	1:5 (1:5)	1:27	1:31 (1:28)
<b>TCD</b>	29%	23% (16%)	1:6	1:6 (1:5)	1:12	1:16 (1:21)
<b>UCC</b>	24%	19% (18%)	1:6	1:6 (1:6)	1:17	1:21(1:22)
<b>UCD</b>	24%	23% (20%)	1:4	1:4 (1:4)	1:10	1:11 (1:12)
<b>UL</b>	31%	31% (31%)	1:5	1:7 (1:7)	1:10	1:12 (1:12)
<b>Overall</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>23% (19%)</b>	<b>1:5</b>	<b>1:5 (1:5)</b>	<b>1:13</b>	<b>1:15 (1:16)</b>

Source: \*HEA (2019a); \*\* HEA (2018a); \*\*\* HEA (2017)

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