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# 'Women managers in higher education: experiences from the UK'

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*University of Sussex, The author would like to thank all the women managers who talked to me about their work, for sharing their time, thoughts and insights*

## Abstract

In this paper, case studies of women undertaking middle management positions in a UK university are presented and analysed, within the context of continuing under-representation of women managers in higher education. In-depth interviews were carried out with six women heads, or former heads, of department, in order to obtain their perspectives on their day to day management experiences, longer term strategies and goals, relationships with colleagues and management styles. The women all perceived their greatest strength as people management and collegiality, and gender was embedded in their work in a complex way. Some recommendations for universities to enhance the opportunities for, and status of, women managers are suggested in conclusion.

*Key words & Phrases : Higher Education, Women Students, Women Academics*

## Introduction

The number of women entering higher education (HE) has increased significantly over the last ten years, as have the numbers of women working in higher education and gaining promotion. However, women are still under-represented in senior management positions and among the professoriate. Within the context of increasing demands for high quality leadership and management in higher education, it is important to study women who have already succeeded in obtaining senior university positions and to identify the leadership skills and qualities that they bring to such roles. It is also vital to highlight the characteristics of forward-looking, supportive academic environments, in which women's potential for academic leadership is recognised and rewarded. In this paper, case studies of women undertaking middle management positions in a UK university will be presented and analysed. We start by discussing the wider context for this study.

## Women students and managers in higher education

The study is located within the policy context of rapid global expansion of higher education over the last ten years. A study of 30 countries by OECD (2002) found that women students represented 54% of all graduates in 2002. In the UK, enrolment in HE has increased by 33% since 1996, especially in part-time courses, with increasing diversity in the student body. This includes a rise in the number of women entering HE, representing

57% of undergraduates by 2006/7 (HESA 2007). We can certainly see very high rates in some countries; for example, 96% of women in Iceland go into higher education, and 91% of women in Australia (OECD 2007). However, women still make up only 24% of science and engineering subjects and less than 40% of all research students worldwide (Newman 2008).

The number of women academics has also increased, but not as rapidly as the number of women students, and there is still a large under-representation of women in management and professorial positions. For example, a study in the 1990s of women managers in 11 countries from the USA to the South Pacific (UNESCO 1993) found that, while women were more strongly represented in middle management positions, women deans and professors were still in the minority and women vice-chancellors were rare. The current position in the UK has improved since then, but not dramatically. According to Warwick (2004), just over a third of academic staff were women; only 13% of professors were women, the majority of these in the arts, humanities and healthcare. This proportion rose to 17.5% of professors by 2006/7 (Newman 2008). Thus, whilst the student population is increasingly female, the senior positions are still predominantly held by men.

## Previous research on women academics

The stark picture which emerges from an analysis of current statistics is reinforced strongly by recent research on women academics, including studies of women managers in higher education. Studies confirm the continuing under-representation of women in management positions in HE (Bagihole 1994, Heward 1996) and their marginalisation in structural and cultural ways (Wisker 1996, Quinn 2003). Particular reasons for this situation identified by researchers include the hierarchical nature of universities (Kettle 1996), traditionally male models of management (Hornby & Shaw 1996), the lack of positive female role models and networks for women managers (Bagihole 1994, Wisker 1996), male resistance and stereotyped attitudes of women's roles (UNESCO 1993).

The UNESCO study (1993) found a contradiction between perceptions of male and female managers. For instance, male managers were expected to be firm and authoritative, whilst women managers were expected to show these characteristics as well as more traditionally female qualities such as nurturing and empathy. The study also argued that women managers tended to be more idealistic in their management aspirations, and less interested in power and status than their male counterparts. Similarly, a study of 50 women in leadership positions in eight universities in Australia (Blackmore & Sachs 2001) carried out in a period of radical change in HE, found some contradictory positioning of women managers, giving rise to a 'cultural clash' (ibid p. 51) for many women. Their overall conclusion was that male managers benefited more from restructuring than women, as women managers were still excluded from power positions.

On a more positive note, some studies stress the transformative potential of women managers. Wisker (1996) argues that women only training and women's networks are important for women, in a context where largely male models of management are still prevalent, while a study in the USA by Madden (2002) reinforces the importance of mentoring. Both authors emphasise the positive contribution that women managers can make and the importance of moving away from traditional, top down management cultures in HE.

## Context and methodology

This study was carried out in a university in the south of England. University statistics for 2004/5 show that women represented 46% of lecturers, 31% of senior lecturers and 16% of professors, slightly higher than the national UK figures for the same year; overall women are under-represented in senior posts. At the time of the study, the university was engaged in major restructuring; the senior management team consisted of three men and one woman.

The sample of six women managers was drawn from arts and social science departments and consisted of five current and one former heads of departments, with varying lengths of time in post, ranging from one to three years. The size of departments ranged between 10 to 40 faculty on varying contracts, with a number of

associate tutors from 4 to 200. Two of the women were professors, one was a reader and the others senior lecturers. Their ages ranged from mid 30s to late 50s and they had been at the university from between four and 24 years.

This was a pragmatic sample, as I selected the women from those I knew from my own work as a woman manager, which was easier given the tight time scale of the study. An interpretive, case study approach was used (Cohen et al 2000) in order to elicit the perspectives of the women on their management roles. In-depth interviews were carried out in the women's offices, and tape recorded. The interviews explored the women's perspectives on their day to day management experiences, longer term strategies and goals, relationships with colleagues and management styles. Factors affecting their role, such as prior management experience, training, support from departmental colleagues and senior university managers, were also explored. In order to protect anonymity, all names and some personal details have been changed. I also assured the women of confidentiality by transcribing the interviews myself. Given the nature of their roles and the work they were describing, these measures were particularly important.

In analysing the findings, some major themes emerged: the importance of prior experience and training; nature of the work and management styles; relationships with colleagues and senior managers. Rewards and challenges of the role and gender issues are embedded in each section and will be drawn together towards the end of the paper.

## Prior experience and training

Interestingly, all six women had prior management experience, albeit on a smaller scale, in non-academic contexts in either the public or voluntary sectors, not always related to their current discipline. They all mentioned how useful this was when moving into heads of department roles, although three of the women stressed that their previous management work had been easier, due to hierarchical structures being more clear-cut outside universities. Only one of the women had held a management role in another university.

None of the women were promoted into the role; the two professors had been promoted prior to becoming heads of department. Reasons for taking on the head of department role varied. Frances explained: 'I hadn't done it before so it seemed a reasonable thing to do, to make a contribution to the collective good.' In contrast, Vanessa took the job over from someone who 'couldn't carry on' rather than from choice. She explained, 'I needed to give something back to the university. No one said you should do it, there was no obligation but I felt morally obliged.' Both women expressed a sense of collegiality and moral value of the role; this underpinned all the women's descriptions of their work. Most of the women had had little or no training for the role. For instance, Vanessa felt completely unprepared, especially as she had to take on the job at short notice. In contrast, the most recently appointed manager, Marian, had had a long induction 'to ensure a smooth handover when I took over the role', and some individual coaching by a woman trainer, which she found invaluable, as in Madden's (2002) study.

Three of the women managers were attending the newly introduced academic leadership programme, which was available to some heads of department nominated by the (all male) Deans, therefore restricted by senior male gatekeepers. The university policy is now for all managers to receive training. However, for the current women managers, it was seen as a case of 'too little, too late.' Marian felt a lot of time had been wasted 'by people moaning about university restructuring'. Liz, on the other hand, found it useful to meet other managers and realise that 'everyone's got the same issues...some people had worse experiences.'

Two of the women belonged to a women only action learning set, both of whom found it very useful indeed. The group operated under strict rules of confidentiality, enabling women to talk about issues and problems openly in an atmosphere of trust. Frances stressed, 'The women's group is important. Being a senior woman in this kind of environment is challenging and needs a particular sharing approach to help.' This echoes Wisker's (1996) view that women only training is important. In the context of this study, the group seemed particularly important as several of the women

managers felt unsupported elsewhere, particularly by their male line managers.

### The nature of the work and management styles

Frances's word 'challenging' summed up a great deal of the way the women heads of department described their work. This fell into two broad areas: firstly, the day to day, immediate business, or as Margaret put it, 'loos, car parks and cups of tea.' Frances described it as the 'sheer kind of pragmatic detail. Always urgent, tricky, needs creative problem solving but not particularly difficult. Time consuming and irksome.' Both women mentioned the huge quantity of emails they received, which Margaret found 'relentless...desperately hard to keep on top of.'

All the women mentioned dealing with people on a day to day basis as a major part of this day to day work. Margaret spent a lot of time 'sitting down with people and talking about workloads. Quite time consuming'. Both Liz and Vanessa had an open door policy, which they thought was important to their way of working. Liz said, 'People can pop in to say they're worried about a student or to pass the time of day...It works for me, I have a real sense of how people are feeling.' Similarly, Vanessa explained: 'People feel they can knock on my door any time. Most people feel I'm very approachable even if I can't solve their problems.' Jane also spent a lot of time meeting individual members of her department, but unlike the other two, preferred to make appointments, perhaps because she had a much larger department. The way that Liz and Vanessa described this approach sounded like a semi-counselling role, and was central to their view of good people management.

The second major area of work was more strategic, including longer term planning, financial management and other major projects, such as curriculum change and appointments. This was also very time consuming and left little time for either teaching or research. Frances described the 'constant drip drip of development work,' although she preferred this to the immediacy of other aspects and felt she handled the big issues better. All the women talked about having a reflective, measured approach to the larger matters, which involved a range of complex activities such as gaining consent from faculty for changes, dealing with senior management, as well as writing planning documents and generally having an overview of the work of the department. As with day to day matters, relationships were always at the heart of the process.

### Relationships with colleagues and senior managers

Most of the women managers described the importance of a collegial approach to working with faculty in their departments and often put others' needs first. Frances described this as a 'kind of service mentality'; she and others stressed the importance of building good relationships, boosting morale and ensuring that staff were working together positively. This was particularly difficult at a time of organisational change. Liz took a great deal of personal interest in her colleagues, stressing that issues like 'kids and mortgages' impacted on how people were working, and were therefore important to know about. She regarded this responsive approach as a gendered dimension of her management style, and a potential weakness as she could get too involved.

Liz and others had management teams to act as sounding boards and help them with strategic aspects of their role, but described dealing with difficult situations in an individual way. Difficulties with colleagues could blow up into major problems, as Margaret reported with feeling in relation to two particular events she had dealt with during her time as head of department. Marian took a lot of time to think through how she would deal with potentially difficult issues and tried to pre-empt dissent by having sound reasons for her actions. On the advice of her coach, she acted very much from her own 'core values', rather than acting as others expected. Although she felt she adopted an inclusive approach, she also acknowledged that she could be - and needed to be - authoritative at times. Other women managers also described the tension between collegiality and authority, some finding the latter aspect easier than others, as the UNESCO study also found (1993).

The women managers had varying opinions about the amount of support they felt they had from immediate line managers. Frances identified a shift from the Dean

as a key support role, as the university reorganised in what she saw as a more top down way. All the women had had to forge relationships with the senior management team which some had found harder than others. For example while Liz, a more experienced manager, frequently went straight to the top, Marian, a new manager, was more diffident about contacting the senior managers. Liz was aware of the gender imbalance in the senior team which had an impact, describing it as the 'culture of the corridor, very much boys together'. Masculinised cultures in universities have been reported by many others (e.g. Wisker 1996, Madden 2002).

What all the women stressed was that, as middle managers, they had to play a mediating role between their own departments on the one hand and senior management on the other. This was one of the most challenging aspects of their role, especially during restructuring, similar to findings by Blackmore & Sachs (2001). The women described the difficult, sometimes uncomfortable, balance between keeping their departments on board and implementing new initiatives from the top. Frances described it as a 'very lonely job' because of the perceived lack of support from senior management. She and others had found it particularly hard to keep going when resources and staffing were stretched. The women all reported relief that decisions had been made about how the university would be reorganised and felt that they could now move forward more positively.

**Gender and authority: contradictory terms?**

What emerges strongly from the interviews is a set of potential polarities, between collegiality and authority, top down and bottom up management styles. Because of the nature of their middle management role, made more extreme because of reorganisation, the women managers were constantly negotiating and renegotiating their position in relation to their departments on the one hand, and senior management on the other. There were tensions and difficulties in trying to balance these two aspects. However, some of this tension also came from being women; there was evidence of contradictory positioning and dual expectations of women managers also reported in other studies (e.g. UNESCO 1993, Kettle 1996, Madden 2002).

Frances articulated this tension with great insight, when she described gender and power as 'fault lines', underpinning both individual academics and the university culture as a whole, as well as wider society. While she did not experience overt sexism as a woman manager, she felt strongly that 'embedded assumptions' about how men and women should act often impacted on what she did, such as gendered expectations that women managers would be more emotional than men. Vanessa also stressed that she had made a conscious decision not to show emotion to senior colleagues, for fear of being labelled or thought unable to cope. Particular strengths that the women managers cited included their collegial approach, attention to detail, sensitivity to process and personal dynamics, versatility and flexibility. What some of them felt they did less well was to set boundaries, delegate and be assertive, although this varied according to their personality and length of time in a management role. They recognised that these perceived strengths and weaknesses were very gendered; some found it easier to acknowledge their own authoritative nature than others.

In spite of difficulties, overall the women found the role rewarding, and enjoyed aspects of it at a personal and professional level. Margaret described it as 'quite creative, like a jigsaw puzzle, how the pieces fit together...I like it and like doing it.' She found the most rewarding aspects were successfully supporting the promotions of colleagues. Vanessa cited how well her colleagues had 'pulled together' and worked successfully towards a major internal review of their work. Jane mentioned the positive feedback from colleagues as well as some senior managers. Marian summed up her own feelings about the role very appositely: 'My own research is about caring...I'm very aware of the balance between caring and authority... When you go into a particular [management] situation, there is something that is very individual, self-reliant, being prepared to accept yourself as an authority figure.' For all the women managers, this personal insight and professional development had been a steep learning curve.

## Conclusions and recommendations

As can be seen from the case studies, being a woman manager in a largely male-dominated university context is a tough job, and calls on great resilience, strength of character and sheer stamina. The findings of this small-scale study reinforce those of other studies (e.g. Heward 1996, Blackmore & Sachs 2001) in terms of the difficulties faced by women managers on a day to day basis, as well as the strengths and many positive attributes that women can bring to management roles.

In order to capitalise on these strengths, universities need to provide adequate training, including some one to one coaching or women-only group training, as these were found particularly helpful by the women in this study (see also Wisker 1996, Madden 2002). There also need to be spaces for women managers to get together to discuss issues and problems, such as the action learning set described earlier. Importantly, senior managers need to be sensitive to the inevitable demands of middle management roles, and be willing to provide support and encouragement. There are larger structural and cultural issues about the ways that universities are managed generally, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. Overall, there is a need for more women managers to act as positive role models to others, as well as to the still-growing number of women students.

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