Leading and managing contemporary UK universities: do excellence and meritocracy still prevail over diversity?

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Abstract

The paper uses a gendered and feminist perspective to explore some dimensions of the debate about excellence and diversity in relation to the leadership and management of UK universities. The paper considers the extent to which notions about excellence and diversity are in tension in UK higher education and how understandings, underpinning values and the practical consequences of excellence and diversity connect or are at odds with the equally pervasive idea of a university as a meritocracy. The paper draws on two recent research projects, one which examined the experiences and management of equal opportunities policies for university staff in six UK universities and the other which has analysed public service leadership, leadership development and change agency in schools, health services and universities in England.

Key words: leadership, universities, meritocracy, diversity, equality, meritocracy
Introduction

Using a feminist and gendered perspective, the paper examines the excellence and diversity debate in relation to the leadership and management of UK universities, considering the extent to which excellence and diversity are in tension in UK higher education, alongside the continued significance of the idea of universities as meritocracies. Two recent research projects involving the author are drawn upon to illustrate these tensions. The first project is a study funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2004 (‘Negotiating Equity’). This project examined the experiences and management of equal opportunities policies for university staff in six UK universities (Deem, Morley and Tlili 2005) in the context of recent UK legislation and EU employment directives widening the range of equality issues to include age, religion, culture and sexual orientation. The second project, (the ‘Change Agent Project’ or CAP), is a UK Economic and Social Science Research Council funded investigation (2006-2009, award no RES 000-23-1136). CAP focuses on public service leadership, leadership development and change agency in schools, health services and universities in England.

The three concepts of excellence, meritocracy and diversity are often positioned together in exchanges about organisations and social systems but each has its own distinct features. This is demonstrated by David’s analysis of UK and USA widening participation policies and other aspects of social diversity and democracy (David 2009) and Morley and Lugg’s exploration of the mapping of meritocracy in relation to gender, poverty and access to higher education in low-income African countries (Morley and Lugg 2009), both in this issue. All three concepts have political as well as social and cultural implications. Excellence is associated with the rise of neo-liberal managerialism in public services, via the search for supposedly non-gendered excellence, efficiency and effectiveness in core service activities through overt management of organisations and the professionals working in them (Peters and Waterman 1982; Exworthy and Halford 1999; Salisbury and Riddell 2000). However, excellence also pre-dates neo-liberalism, as a concept that refers to something or someone possessing very high quality characteristics in one or more fields of endeavour and literally excelling over
others, such as a graduate who gains a first class honours degree or a scientist who wins a Nobel prize. Excellence is also highly relevant to universities seeking differentiation from other universities, as it is used to distinguish one institution from another on the basis, for example, of research grants won, doctorates awarded, or the number of publication citations. In seeking excellence, it is necessary to select and differentiate between individuals; those who are considered excellent may differ in other respects but the latter are not taken into account in making the selection. Excellence is also, for some authors, associated with the notion of privilege, as exemplified in the idea of privileged access to institutions and resources (Maher and Tetreault 2007).

The second concept, meritocracy, refers to the selection of individuals purely on the basis of merit, without any reference to the social or cultural characteristics such as gender or the social-political networks of the individuals selected. Both excellence and meritocracy are concerned with selecting and excluding. Like excellence, meritocracy has political associations and is linked in the UK to the 1960s and 1970s debate about comprehensive schools (Kerckhoff, Fogelman, Crook and Reeder 1996), which sought to avoid the social class and gender biases of eleven-plus intelligence tests which selected pupils for different types of school, by sending all pupils to non-selective neighbourhood school.

The third concept, diversity, usually refers to the existence of people in the same (in this case, organisational) setting who have a range of social and cultural backgrounds and networks. Diversity is centrally concerned with inclusion rather than exclusion. The very social and cultural characteristics that are allegedly ignored in pursuit of excellence and meritocracy, are central to the creation and maintenance of diversity. Diversity is a term now closely associated with the politics of equality in the UK and other EU countries (Squires 2002) and particularly with the idea of gender mainstreaming (Morley 2007) whereby gender and other forms of social and cultural divisions are rolled together in public policies rather than seen as separate. Diversity may be appropriated as a form of political language by organisations who have little understanding of or any intention to deal with, its complexities (Maher and Tetreault 2007). Diversity has also been identified by feminist
researchers as being closely associated with a move away from *redistributive* policies related to social justice towards greater emphasis on the *recognitional* politics of distinct cultural and social groups (Fraser 1995; Fraser and Honneth 1998; Fraser 2000). This means, in effect, that what emerges are policies which celebrate or tolerate difference but without addressing either the material and social basis or the consequences of difference.

In the life of UK universities (and many others too), the three concepts tend to arise in relation to different organisational contexts. Thus excellence is often privileged above diversity in relation to research, especially given the UK emphasis on research selectivity since 1986 through the periodic peer subject by subject Research Assessment Exercise review of academic inputs and outputs and academic infrastructure (Lucas 2006), where gender bias has been identified as a possible shortcoming in exercises prior to 2008 (Harley 2003). Meritocratic gender and culture-blind appointments may be justified in the field of research on the basis that academic merit alone is what is required. In respect of degree study, excellence is rewarded in the assessment system, as is the notion of meritocracy (for example by using anonymised marking systems). But with the recent UK government policy emphasis on widening the social basis of participation in degree level university education (Layer 2005; Greenbank 2006; Hale 2006) diversity has also begun to enter the equation. Consideration now has to be given by UK publicly-funded universities not just to the academic merit of applicants but also to their educational and social background. In relation to the characteristics of university employees, recent research on UK higher education institutions and equality policies for staff (Deem, Morley and Tlili 2005) has shown that diversity is not infrequently viewed as desirable in the abstract but with little attempt to address the reasons why diversity is hard to achieve in certain occupational categories. There are also indications of great caution being exercised in respect of taking any positive action to increase diversity (Deem and Morley 2006; Deem 2007). Finally, when we come to examine the leadership of UK higher education institutions, whilst some diversification has taken place in relation to the discipline backgrounds of institutional heads (for instance more social scientists than previously), the numbers of women remain very low and are almost non-existent in respect of
ethnicity (Breakwell and Tytherleigh 2008). Current research with senior leadership teams in six universities in England found that the notion of excellence scarcely emerged in relation to leadership development, yet conversely, Goodall has argued that there is a correlation between the top 100 research-focused universities in the world and the research excellence of the institutional head (Goodall 2009).

The paper now moves on to explore some of the tensions between excellence, diversity and meritocracy.

The Negotiating Equity project – equality, diversity and meritocracy

The Higher Education Funding Council for England ‘Negotiating Equity’ research project, part of a programme of projects on equality (Abbott and Sapsford 2005; PriceWaterhouse Coopers LLP 2005; PriceWaterhouse Coopers LLP 2005; Ross 2005; Strebler and O’Regan 2005), consisted of six case studies of staff experiences and perceptions of employee equality policies using a cross-sectional sample of six UK higher education organisations (from England, Scotland and Wales) (Deem, Morley and Tili 2005). Critical discourse analysis was used to examine each institution’s equality policies (Tili 2007). 60 interviews and 25 focus groups were conducted with staff from different occupational groups (including senior managers) from varied social and cultural backgrounds, exploring experiences of equality policies and examining how senior managers thought the pursuit of equal opportunities was progressing in their institutions. The data suggested that concerns with excellence and meritocratic practices took precedence over concerns to do with diversity and erasing inequality. Institutional equality policies were frequently out-of-date or poorly communicated to staff. Equality policies for staff and students were often in tension with each other (with the latter better resourced and supported). Staff equality policies sometimes clashed with other institutional policies, for example on research excellence or enhancing the student experience (where inequality issues for staff were sometimes subordinated on the basis that students were more important to the institution) and the rhetoric of equality policies was not always matched by the day-to-day experience of staff. We also noted that whilst experience of direct discrimination reported by respondents was not high, a number of respondents reflected on the
discriminatory experiences of colleagues and particularly amongst female support staff, there was a fear of making a complaint about an inequality issue. Staff views about diversity of staff exhibited some scepticism that attention had been paid to this; the following quotes typify this:

we don’t really have much experience of equality and diversity issues to be honest, because we are a predominantly white middle-class organisation ... (the region) is like that anyway, so we’re just kind of reflecting what the society outside is (support staff focus group, Sandside II, Scotland)

the university has taken to appointing head hunters to try to recruit staff at senior level. I don't know but my guess is that some of that is around trying to change the profile of some senior staff. Whether it's to reflect greater diversity ... but I'm not completely confident that that's working... I wish they would say publicly, look, you know, we are very conscious, ... we're all white males and we've got to change this over time (support staff focus group, Eastville, England)

the buzz term is ‘research-led’, everything’s got to be ‘research-led’ ... That’s happening everywhere. So the people are employing almost exclusively new people anyway there, exclusively in terms of their potential, their current research output, their potential research output ... the main priority is going to be getting people who can, or have, or will publish, and they’re going to see things through that lens only rather than think, well okay, maybe we’re not absolutely sure whether this male candidate or that female candidate is better, but in the circumstances we’ll probably take the female one. They’re not necessarily going to do that if there’s any chance at all, for example, that the male candidate will publish a bit more over a period of time. (academic trade unionist, Westside, Wales)

These data suggest that in 2004, in all but one case institution, diversity amongst employees was not a priority, although employees in non-managerial roles thought that much more attention had been paid to student diversity (which is more closely monitored nationally), which had also benefited from more resource-injection. When we explored the views of senior leaders and managers towards equality policies in the six case study institutions, there was some complacency when we asked them for their future visions of diversity:
I don’t think we’re particularly non-equitable at the moment … I’m not aware of huge inequalities or huge biases against particular students or groups of staff or students (senior administrator, Speyside, Scotland post-1992 university)

Only rarely did we find amongst our 37 senior management interviewees, any real awareness that lack of staff diversity remained a problem or that student diversity and staff diversity were discrepant in some way. Gender itself was largely regarded as a success story and as accomplished already, as David (this issue) also notes, although this was not always consistent with what female employees said about their experiences of work or promotion. We also found quite a lot of evidence that there were significant tensions between concerns about equality and diversity on the one hand and excellence on the other. This particularly surfaced in discussions of the UK RAE, where excellence tended to win out, even when there were ethical qualms about this, as in the responses below:

I am concerned that in fact we don’t advertise as widely as we should and we often have someone in mind, that is at Post Doc level … Well there’s good aspects about it I’m sure. But we are not be able to think through these issues; the wider you go you get the best possible pool of applicants but cos I’ve got to produce the papers for the RAE and therefore I’ve got to get somebody on quicker and not take somebody who, somebody who fits equality (Male science dean, Cityscape, England)

Um, I think perhaps there are issues about … the way that staff are valued. So what constitutes success? …Where do we get most of our academics from, out of? You know particularly things like RAEs. … you get a lot of fighting for the best academics who come out of the elitist universities. And predominantly in the way that British society is structured, as we all know, that’s heavily biased towards the independent school sector in certain areas … So until you start changing those values … it’s not equitable when you go into the system, so it’s not equitable when you come out of the system. (female PVC, Speyside, Scotland)

you will get heads of department for example will say ‘Look you know I understand that we have to be aware of employment legislation and EU directives and so on and so forth but actually what I’m much more concerned about is the RAE, and making sure that my department moves from a 5 to 5*. Because if I don’t we won’t be here next year.’ The pressures are on. (male PVC, Westside, Wales)
What we also noted in our analysis of the responses from management interviewees was that there was very limited enthusiasm for taking affirmative action on inequality, for example, provision of training for underrepresented groups.

I have a huge objection to affirmative action ... It doesn't do the employer any good because it doesn't necessarily mean you employ the best people. And it doesn't do the people who are employed any good because they always have this nagging doubt about whether they got the job because they were the best or simply because they were the only woman who applied, or you know the only Asian who applied (Male Dean of Technology, Cityscape, English pre-1992 university)

Overall, the ‘Negotiating Equity’ data from senior managers suggested that one of the reasons why UK universities were struggling to implement employment-related inequalities was that there was great difficulty in squaring this with meritocracy and the pursuit of excellence. This is less surprising if we remember that those at the top are highly likely to have succeeded in a meritocratic context themselves and hence may have little desire to change the system. In the next section, we examine the relationship between UK higher education’s attachment to excellence and meritocracy, the appointment and characteristics of senior leaders and the importance of excellence in the selection of these leaders and the development of senior leaders.

Excellence and diversity in UK university leadership?

UK university leadership remains overwhelmingly male-dominated. Diversity concerns remain muted. A recent study, examining the position since 1996, notes that the top leadership of the UK university sector is still overwhelmingly male dominated, with a mean age at appointment of middle fifties, a UK academic background (often Oxbridge), and no professional management qualifications (Breakwell and Tytherleigh 2008). Though there have been a few appointments from non-academic backgrounds since 1996, these are very much a minority, as are overseas appointments. Since 1996 more women have been appointed but still only 20% of all university heads
are female (with most women being social scientists). Overall, there is now a much wider discipline mix than 20 years ago, with 39% of those appointed since 1997 being from social science backgrounds rather than from the previously predominant sciences (Bargh, Bocock, Scott and Smith 2000). How heads of universities get appointed has also changed. The selection procedures for most such posts and for a growing number of other senior posts in universities are now conducted through a small number of executive search agencies, or headhunters (Breakwell 2006). This could be seen as evidence of a concerted attempt to search out excellence in leadership but as Watson notes, it may have the effect of narrowing the field of applicants rather than widening it, since headhunters tend to rely on limited networks of contacts (Watson 2008). Furthermore, in current research on senior leaders in universities, it became clear that one major source of names of possible candidates for vice-chancellor positions used by headhunters was those who had taken or who were currently taking the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education’s Top Management Programme, an extended and expensive course aimed at aspiring academic leaders. It is not clear whether women who aspire to become academic leaders always get the same opportunity to attend the course as men, as one female respondent’s comments suggested:

the most recent thing is that I've been accepted on to the Top Management programme … I had to have the support of my Vice Chancellor, and the financial support, because it's jolly expensive, I mean it's about £14,000 ..that is both to support me in my current role, but I've also got a very strong eye on its use in terms of my further career paths … I was interviewed for a Vice Chancellor position recently, and the first question that I was asked was why I hadn't been on the TMP, and actually the reason that I hadn't at that time was...a bit of negotiation with the Vice Chancellor about this (Female PVC, Longley, post-1992)

Excellence is not a term much discussed in the literature on higher education management, though terms like ‘successful’ and ‘effective’ are much more commonplace. Bryman’s recent study of effective leadership in higher education, including an extensive literature review, provides a good overview of the characteristics of effective leadership but does not mention the term excellence at all (Bryman 2007). Bryman does, however, note that there
are relatively few studies that actually look at the link between leader
behaviour and effectiveness and observes that there is also little guidance on
how leaders might go about enacting some of the key aspects of leadership.
An American study of 13 academic department chairs in a four-campus
university system (Benoit and Graham 2005) talks about characteristics of
successful department heads rather than characteristics of excellence. Of
course success and excellence might be related but this is not an argument
pursued anywhere in the literature.
Indeed, the only context in which the issue of excellence seems to arise in
connection with university leadership is in relation to the academic excellence
of university leaders' research. Goodall, an economist, has conducted a
detailed empirical study which focuses on the debate about whether leaders
of top research universities in the world should themselves have a record of
academic excellence prior to appointment (Goodall 2009). Her conclusion is
that this is desirable not only because it provides leaders with strong
credibility amongst academics themselves but also because university leaders
who have excellent academic credentials and a strong publication citation
record are predominantly found running the world’s top research universities,
especially in the USA. This emphasis on research excellence is, of course,
perfectly compatible with the earlier arguments made in the paper about the
prevailing ethos of meritocracy in many universities.
If leadership (rather than research) excellence seems not to feature in
discussions about university leadership, does it feature in discussions about
how university senior leaders and their teams seek leadership development?
And what about diversity? Does that seem to be an issue for discussion? We
now turn to some findings from a current research project on public service
leadership.

**Leadership diversity; an issue for current UK university leaders?**
The ESRC funded ‘Change Agent Project’ (2006-2009) focuses on exploring
how notions of change agency and leadership development strategies in
public services mesh with current government reform and modernisation
plans, using interviews with a sample of organisational leaders and senior
leadership teams in secondary schools, hospitals, primary care trusts and
universities in England and also talking to aspiring leaders, key stakeholder organisations, officials and trainers from national leadership development bodies and HE policy makers. A critical discourse analysis of government documents since the New Labour government came to power in 1997 has also been conducted.

Gender remains a significant issue in the leadership of UK universities. In the CAP project, we expected that finding women in senior teams would be hard, since this had been an issue in a previous project on managerialism in UK universities (Deem, Hillyard and Reed 2007). We interviewed 30 university senior team members in 2007, of which 11 were women, of whom six had an academic background. Of the six universities that we selected for our sample (a mix of pre- and post-1992 universities with a range of missions from highly research-intensive to highly teaching-focused), one had no women amongst those who made themselves available for interview, three had one woman, one two and one four. The institution with the most women in the senior team also had a woman vice-chancellor. Amongst women academics in the UK, whilst there is a growth in the percentages in lower-level posts (in 2006-7 46% of lecturers were female), in the same year just over 17.5% of full professors were women. Breakwell and Tytherleigh’s (2008) research shows that most UK vice-chancellors are appointed from the ranks of academics and since 1997, 82% were professors, so it is a problem that there are still relatively few women in the pool.

In our 2007 senior leadership team interviews, we were interested in the kinds of notions of leadership held by our 30 respondents. The vast majority did not espouse the notion of leadership as charismatic (which we found was the most common discourse of leadership in New Labour government documents since 2001). Indeed 20 respondents mentioned distributed leadership as being a feature of their institution. This emphasis on distributed leadership was also found in another recent study of UK university leadership conducted with 152 respondents in 12 universities (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling 2008).

Having a senior management team was universal, with typically a mix of deputy and pro-vice chancellors and senior administrators (and sometimes deans):
I'm a member of the directorate; my portfolio is everything to do with the academic work of the university, all the student facing side of things, academic administration, learning resources, the international office registry - which includes admissions, research degree students, all student support services, and in terms of my more general role with the Vice Chancellor ... I work closely with the Vice Chancellor doing all the things that aren't in that list that are the general things that go on in any university ... it's a fairly typical PVC role (female PVC, Longley, post-1992)

However, a team approach, involving interdependency, a common purpose, stable membership, clear performance goals and mutual accountability, is not necessarily a good description of what happens in universities (Kennie and Woodfield 2007). Below the senior level, distributed leadership most often referred to the existence of academic committees and devolved management structures such as budget-holding deans. There are two problems with this. Firstly, committees may simply be a long-standing means of making academics think they are involved in collective management when little authority to make decisions actually exists, whilst devolved management in universities can involve responsibility without power, as an earlier study of management in UK universities suggested (Deem, Hillyard and Reed 2007). Secondly, given the scarcity of women professors, it is unlikely that many university committee members and devolved budget holders are women. Distributed leadership does not seem to be correlated with diversity in leadership.

**Excellence and leadership development in UK universities**

In this section, the focus is on the extent to which the notion of excellence arises in relation to the development of leaders in UK higher education. Thirteen of our 30 senior respondents in six universities were new to senior leadership and nine people had undertaken significant leadership training either prior to or on taking up their leadership position, whilst seventeen had experienced some leadership development provision from the UK wide Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. In general, the views expressed suggested that substantial leadership development was best suited to those who were fairly new to leadership. Experience was of more concern to many
established leaders than developing excellence in their leadership skills by learning more about leadership:

I think it would have been helpful thirty years ago to have done some of the training programmes that are now available. But, two things: one, is they would have interfered with a very intensive research-based life, and secondly, the ones I know about are very focused on teaching and learning … It wasn't management really that interested me. I know I've taken on management roles now, but that was the never the target, or the intention, and I don't think I'd be significantly better at my job if I'd been to some of these training programmes, which are much more, I think, about skills for administrators (male PVC, Hopton)

According to our respondents, what leadership programmes were aimed at was not excellence in leadership but rather familiarity with different approaches to leading change:

I think the thing they placed most stress on was, there were two sorts of change, there was the stuff imposed on us from outside like top-up fees, … to the need for a bit of careful, longer-term thought about the needs of the institution, and how you steer it over the next sort of few years (male PVC, Longley)

it wasn't a skills-based course … it was much, much broader than that. I think it helped you in terms of very much the wider policy agenda, and an idea how different organisations operate (female PVC, Fairoaks)

For several respondents, the most important aspect of going on something like the Top Management Programme (TMP) was perceived to lie in the development of networks. If there are few women on these programmes then de facto, women are unlikely to be prominent in those networks. As one Deputy Vice Chancellor said of the TMP:

If I want to be a VC, yes. Do I think it's crucial? No. Do I think it's helpful? Yes. But, again, I would say that that in itself is partly driven by the sort of closed nature, you know, we appoint in our own image, and so, you know, if people have been on the TMP, and those on the appointment panel have been on the TMP, you know, it's a club (female DVC, Furzedown)

Given headhunters’ use of networks when searching out possible candidates for a position, being part of a ‘club’ may well be critical for selection as a
candidate for a VC post and thus may exclude some potential female and ethnic minority candidates. Thus, on the one hand, academic excellence still lies at the heart of many UK universities. On the other hand, it is not clear that a commitment to excellence drives the leadership of universities. Of course, it is not that necessarily the case that individual leaders lack excellence but the emergence of leadership excellence may be much more serendipitous than the emergence of academic excellence in research or student performance. Meritocracy, it seems, has its limits.

Conclusion
The paper has explored from a feminist and gender perspective, the relevance and usage of the concepts of excellence, meritocracy and diversity in contemporary UK universities and the possible relationships, tensions and contradictions which exist between the three concepts when applied to higher education. Excellence (although recently ideologically associated with new managerialism) and meritocracy have a longstanding presence in universities and reflect values about academic life which underpin much of the research and teaching and assessment carried out by academics. Diversity is a newcomer to higher education, carried there by the twin policies of widening participation and equality policies for staff and students. UK universities appear to have found it hard to reconcile notions of diversity, itself a poor relation of concepts such as inequality and social exclusion, with their pursuit of excellence and meritocracy. The paper examined two research projects based in UK universities to see what they revealed about the tensions between excellence, meritocracy and diversity. The first project, ‘Negotiating Equity’ focused on the experiences of university employees in relation to recent equalities policies and EU employment directives and the accounts of senior university managers about how these policies were developed and implemented. It showed that gender, ethnicity, disability and other social and cultural divisions are still strong despite equality policies. The second study, the ‘Change Agent Project’ has been exploring the change agency role and leadership development experiences of senior leaders and their teams in universities (alongside similar teams in healthcare and secondary schools).
and this and other research were used to consider the extent to which diversity, excellence and meritocracy presented challenges for leadership. The emerging picture of the UK higher education system suggests that (mainly white male) university leaders continue to see their institutions as culture-fair meritocracies despite government policies on equality and widening participation and hence still perceive excellence as more important than diversity. This is so in almost all spheres of academe, except for widening participation of students and (ironically), in relation to the development of leaders, where excellence in past academic performance is seemingly valued highly in some institutions but management qualifications are not. Moreover, ideas of leadership excellence are not even discussed. Gender and ethnic diversity in leadership has been very slow to develop and is not as supported by notions of distributed leadership as it might at first appear. This is reflected in the composition of UK university leadership as well as in the composition of the organisations themselves. There is then, little indication that diversity is an important consideration in the selection of leaders in UK universities but on the other hand, nor is it clear that excellence in leadership per se is a feature of such leadership appointments either. So whilst for much of UK academic life, both excellence and meritocracy prevail, with diversity very much a third string, in respect of leadership itself, both diversity and excellence are more muted. Perhaps in time this will lead to some reflections on whether excellence and meritocracy are still appropriate for the 21st century university, which is located in an increasingly diverse and differentiated global setting.

References


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ii The names of institutions are pseudonyms

* In England, Scotland and Wales, positive discrimination, such as, for instance, deliberately targeting women or members of ethnic minority groups as candidates or appointing them because they are under-represented is illegal. It is only legal in Northern Ireland which has different legislation arising from the longstanding sectarian conflicts there.