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## **The challenge of contesting structures that reproduce gender inequalities: the dual power of new managerialism and masculine norms in academic settings**

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# The Challenge of Contesting Structures that Reproduce Gender Inequalities: The Dual Power of New Managerialism and Masculine Norms in Academic Settings

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## **Abstract**

Despite attempts to broaden access to higher education in the UK through widening participation policies from the 1990s onwards and more recent national and local prioritising of gender equality in institutional strategic planning via initiatives such as the Athena SWAN charter, radical gender change in numerical and cultural terms is allusive.

This paper proposes that universities, in the context of accelerated change, remain 'conservative' organisations with regards to working norms and career progression. Increasingly research and higher education institutions have multiple demands laid on them – demands for scientific excellence, demands for organisational innovation, the need to respond to student needs – and gender equality is but one amongst many competing demands that require action and reflection. It is important to understand how multiple demands can reinforce or undermine each other in terms of organisational activities and change. Drawing on empirical and action research in a UK higher education institution, this paper explores managerialism and concepts of excellence and meritocracy through a gender-lens.

Excellence can be defined as: high mobility; excellent networks; high citations and; high levels of research funding. The quantitative measurement of performance through instruments like the Research Excellence Framework (REF) recognise and foreground particular kinds of activities at the expense of others. In addition to these aspects, the highly competitive environment in academia may exacerbate inequality as research shows that women are less likely to put themselves forward in competitive contexts and are less likely than men to consider themselves as 'excellent'.

Masculine norms of career and working thrive in the environment of increasing competition and recurring research, teaching and administrative performance indicator measurements: women who adhere to masculine norms can succeed, but real change is sidestepped. The lack of meaningful structural change acts as a barrier to gender equality in the academy. The paper concludes by offering some examples and recommendations on how this issue can be addressed.

## Introduction

Universities are facing a period of reformation: political, economic and social change in the higher education sector is increasing. Over recent years trends in student data, for example, show women are now in the majority of higher education entrants in the UK and across many countries in Europe. Despite the broadening of access to higher education and more recent national and local prioritising of gender equality in institutional strategic planning via initiatives such as the Athena SWAN charter, radical gender change in numerical and cultural terms is allusive. So we can see that what has been called ‘the feminization of higher education’ (Klein, 2015; McTavish & Miller, 2009) has not, however, resulted in major shifts in gender equality in university academic staff across the sector, or the widespread acceptance of diverse working practices.

Instead, there appears to be a resilient thread of disadvantage woven into the fabric academia: universities have been consistently described as sites that foster the reproduction of gender inequalities in research on higher education (Seierstad & Healy, 2012; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; White et al., 2011). Moving past positioning the problem in terms of a deficit model – women as deficient – it is recognised that there is a need to understand the context of contemporary higher education, address higher education systems and challenge structures that perpetuate inequalities (Liff & Cameron, 1997).

Universities in the UK in 2016 are changing rapidly. Professors and academics in senior management entered the profession at a time when permanent positions were the norm, performance audits were minimal and administrative support was generous relative to present conditions. The situation has changed significantly, mainly in response to external factors relating to finance. In light of changes to government funding, the sector has been ‘marketised’, which paradoxically leads to greater state regulation (Deem, 1994; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Pollitt, 1993). Research and higher education institutions have multiple demands laid on them – demands for scientific excellence, demands for organisational innovation, the need to respond to student needs – and gender equality is but one amongst many competing demands that require action and reflection. It is important to understand how multiple demands can reinforce or undermine each other in terms of organisational change.

Drawing on empirical and action research in a UK higher education institution, this paper explores managerialism and concepts of excellence and meritocracy through a gender-lens. Action research is a participatory method, tending to be community-based, that is ‘explicitly political, socially engaged, and democratic practice’ (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003: 13). Action research is therefore interpreted as a suitable method for trying to address gender equality in engineering academia. As part of the action research a series of original empirical data was collected through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The paper is also informed by engagement with internal processes (committee meetings, meetings with senior

management) and conversations with academics, making the most of the action research as an opportunistic social research method (Greenwood, 2012).

### **An Expression of Neoliberalism: New Managerialism**

New managerialism can be described as ideas and practices brought into public sector organisations in response to government policies that emphasise the need for reform (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Due to the link to state governance, new managerialism is a management strategy that is argued to be aligned to neo-liberalism (Lynch, 2015; Waitere et al., 2011), which promotes a shift from public to private sector control and management of the economy. The concept of new managerialism highlights both a technical and ideological approach to reform, foregrounding the latter with regards to how power shifts and is reinforced through restructuring processes (Deem & Brehony, 2005), for example in relation to changes in the regimes of bureaucracy and monitoring. Clarke et al. (2000) argue that the ideology of new managerialism foregrounds the need to actively manage public service organisations that have historically been trusted to autonomous professionals. Common features of new managerialism include: an emphasis on management above other activities; monitoring and self-monitoring of performance; development of financial and non-financial targets, including quantification of organisational performance; minimisation of administrative procedures (Le Grand & Bartlett, 1993).

How then can we consider higher education institutions to be under new managerialist regimes, and what is 'new' about new managerialism in higher education? We may certainly see that the rise of the managers more generally in politics and in society (Deem & Brehony, 2005) is reflected in the HE sector in staff numbers as well as in terms of influence: proportions of professional/managerial staff in universities has increased (HESA data). In higher education new managerialism can be linked to external aspects such as government policies and changing funding systems (Deem, 2004), which have driven many changes in the way universities manage themselves. Some have noted a shift of power from academics to policymakers (Waitere et al., 2011) and decentralisation, but with a corresponding increase in oversight by centre. This could be characterised as devolving responsibilities for economic and organisational management, but with decreasing power to autonomously make decisions about how to carry those increasing responsibilities. This 'character' can also be perceived at an individual-level in how academic professional identities and working practices have also changed (which we will come back to again later).

According to Deem & Brehony (2005), new managerialism in higher education can be identified in developments in the following: funding structures; academic work and workloads; research and teaching teamwork; budget delegation through cost centres; internal and external monitoring of academics' performance; and an increase in the proportion of managerial staff in institutions. A key factor in all the developments mentioned is the central role of auditing that result from the new managerialism approach.

Auditing and monitoring, apparently an important part of how organisations function, is not a neutral activity, rather it expresses a particular view of the business of the organisation and the position of employees in the institutional structure: Morley (2003; 2015) describes audit culture as an expression of the neo-liberal gaze. The reduction of the work of an organisation to easily quantifiable indicators simplifies the complex interaction of academics, professional services, support staff and students, in order to make judgements about quality and efficiency. The seemingly irresistible tool underpinned by the audit culture - an instrument of new managerialism which is evident in popular discourse - are university rankings (Lynch, 2015). It is argued that 'the creation of new layers of management and the introduction of performance management, league tables and targets, for example, are not simply discursive' (Deem & Brehony, 2005: 223), as such language and discourse may be considered to be constitutive of reality: audit contributes to discourses of what matters (Lynch, 2015; Power, 1994). A topical example of this is the use of the term 'excellence' in relation to the work of academics.

### **Academic 'Excellence' and its Importance in Competitive Structures**

In higher education the concept of excellence is dominant in discourses on institutional, disciplinary and individual performance in relation to research and teaching. Excellence is dependent upon the idea that its identification is possible, that academia is a meritocracy and that the best rise to the top. The quality of excellence as a potentially 'empty signifier' (Morley, 2015: 13) suggests that it may perform an ambiguous function in discourse in that it can mean different things to different people. What has now evolved into an institutional logic of using KPIs to infer excellence 'does not recognise the subjectivity involved in human decision-making and the effect of group dynamics on these processes' (O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2015: 8). Therefore we can argue that in academia 'success' is subjective (Henley, 2015). Academic excellence may be broadly defined as being evident in a person who has achieved most or all of the following: high mobility; excellent networks; high citations and; high levels of research funding. Though there are other significant aspects of academic work that are not taken into account in such definitions, in particular teaching.

The quantitative measurement of performance through instruments like the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and associated linkage to finances recognise and foreground particular kinds of activities at the expense of others (although this is expected to change again, through the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK in 2016). van den Brink and Benschop (2012) question the neutrality of academic excellence and suggest that the application of evaluation of academic achievement restates gender inequalities. The highly competitive environment in academia may exacerbate inequality as research shows that women are less likely to put themselves forward in competitive contexts and are less likely than men to consider themselves, or be considered by others, as 'excellent' (Benschop & Brouns, 2003). Broadly the idea of self-promotion is argued to be

counter to the modesty of some academics, especially women (Waitere et al., 2011; Phibbs & Curtis, 2006).

The dominance of new managerialism regimes underline individualistic notions of success and excellence, whilst at the same time relying heavily on collegiality and cooperation between academics. Some argue that performance auditing has resulted in 'personal career interests increasingly govern[ing] everyday academic life' (Lynch, 2015: 200). A key factor in most universities is the 'publish or perish' culture, which has been formalised in the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF, formerly Research Assessment Exercise). An example of a similar new managerialism regime in New Zealand is the Performance Based Research Funding, which requires academics to put together a portfolio of evidence on their performance and impact (Waitere et al., 2011). Outcomes of the UK's REF impact on the level of funding allocated from the state, so the linking of REF assessments to quantity and quality of publications has resulted in a situation in which some find the publication pressure paralysing (Teelken and Deem, 2013).

The meritocratic imperative on the surface appears to operate in a gender neutral way – but as in relation to how the concept of excellence may be gendered, other quantifiable indicators may suffer the same bias. The rise of performance management and monitoring has enhanced competitive elements and reinforced particular concepts of academic excellence – related to publication metrics and grants achieved, all of which have shown to demonstrate gender bias in peer review, citations, size of grants and grants awarded. Therefore, it is possible to argue that performance measures have effects on gender inequality in higher education (Teelken and Deem, 2013).

The move towards performance management has also had an impact on the management of gender equality. When HE governance structures brought in assessment of 'quality' of individual academics, departments and institutions, equality itself was not audited for (Teelken and Deem, 2013). Instead, what we have seen in the UK is a largely voluntary add-on initiative – the Athena SWAN Charter – which does look closely at the data and practices at an institutional and department level. What the Charter doesn't do is provide systematic rankings based on quantitative measures – similar to a Gender Gap index. The argument here is not that this ranking approach is a desirable outcome, but that within the context of increasing monitoring of many aspects of higher education, this was not included.

### **Academic Cultural Norms**

Universities, in the context of accelerated change, remain 'conservative' organisations with regards to working norms and career progression. It is argued that academic professional culture is based on a male linear model (Monroe et al., 2008). We can identify three key aspects of traditional masculine academic professional discourse is that 'research is paramount' and 'always working', both of which can be considered through a gender lens. A

third aspect this paper will consider is collegiality and working within a community of academics.

As indicated by the preponderance of attention on research assessment in the sector, research is paramount. This is partly related to the *raison d'être* of universities' existence, which makes them distinct from other forms of adult education or training. Despite a broad remit of academic work split between research, teaching and administration (sometimes referred to as service), research infers the most status and is used as the basis for promotion and appointments. As research has such status and power to build successful careers, the impact of gender inequality in research related activities on gender inequality in higher education more broadly cannot be ignored. In Määttä and Lyckhage's (2011) study, interviews with academics in Sweden identified a perception that overall gender was irrelevant and unproblematic, however, these perceptions were challenged gendered experiences in academia: for example, men focusing on research and masculine traits being associated with research. The idea is that to focus on research above all else is associated with a masculine model of working. To the point where, men who do not correspond to this mode of working do not progress either: one male academic interviewed in our case study institution did not see how his career could develop as his focus is more on teaching.

Another common trope is the 'always working' academic. It is the norm in academic culture to manage your own work, work autonomously and flexibly: all of which appears to suggest that this would result in a situation where academics can easily manage work and home commitments. However, the multitudes of pressure, individualisation of careers, and audit culture has (along with the embedding of ICTs into academic work in the office and at home) resulted in a situation where it is possible to work all the time. In fact for some it is seen to be necessary: a way of managing increasing workloads; a way of ensuring career development, as academics are promoted on 'what they do in the evenings/weekends'. Focus groups with academics in the case study institution show that the pressure of increasing workloads 'where nothing ever seems to be taken away' as well as (or perhaps the result of) increasing internal and external monitoring, there is no end to the work. Other researchers have found that it is almost a 'badge of honour' to not take a vacation over the summer due to being so busy (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). In this scenario, it is clear that anyone works part-time, takes leave to cares for children or elderly relatives are at a disadvantage: O'Connor & O'Hagan, (2015) have found that women's time spent caring in the home is a detriment to their careers. Furthermore, the idea that to be successful requires continual work is not an attractive proposition for those yet to secure an academic position: in interviews and focus groups with women researchers this was raised as one reason for not pursuing an academic career.

A third and final theme in academic norms is related to collegiality: working with the academic community and with teams of researchers. The concept of 'Academic citizenship' (O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2015) emphasises the community aspects of academic work and

highlights how cooperation is a model that operates simultaneously with the competition model outlined above. The majority of academic work requires cooperation with others: furthermore, successful collaborations can have a significant impact on career success. In a gender unequal context (engineering disciplines for example) this can be problematic as there can be implicit bias where men tend to collaborate more with other men (O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2015). Research has found homosociality in academia (Klein, 2015; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012) and management (Lechner, 2012) to have broader impacts on gender equality in the sector.

### **Discussion: The Dual Power of New Managerialism and Masculine Norms**

As outlined above new managerialism is perceived to have taken root in the HE sector (Deem & Brehony, 2005), a sector which has established norms around working that follow a masculine model – so how has this played out? In this section we will consider the main points of convergence and departure and discuss the implications for gender equality in the sector.

The main aspects in which new managerialism and established academic norms converge is in the focus on research. One reason for this convergence is that research productivity is easier to measure than other types of academic work (Altbach, 2014). It is argued that the primacy of research over other aspects and increased emphasis on research productivity in managerialism feed into each other and reinforces gender inequalities (Husu, 2004; van den Brink, 2009; White et al., 2011). Masculine norms of career and working thrive in the environment of increasing competition and recurring research, teaching and administrative performance indicator measurements: women who adhere to masculine norms can succeed, but real change is sidestepped. Therefore, new governance approaches are argued to re-emphasize the status-quo, whilst at the same time enabling inequality to develop a 'veneer of equality' (Teelken and Deem, 2013). Further it is argued that 'audits are double-edged swords that are both essential to expose "illegitimate" biases among decision-makers and to more deeply institutionalize these biases' more "legitimate" forms' (Ferree & Zippel, 2015: 11). In a discussion of the knowledge society, Mósesdóttir (2011) highlights the ways that structural aspects and market forces underpin gender inequalities, which are strengthened further by new managerialism regimes.

As interesting point of departure between new managerialism and masculine norms is in relation to autonomy. Historically academia has had high levels of freedom and autonomy (Barry et al., 2006) and therefore individual autonomy is a core value in academic profession (Mendoza, 2007). However, new managerialism is undermining this core value through measurement and monitoring of academic outputs, which are increasingly directing academics in particular directions, limiting the time available for creativity, exploration and risk-taking.

## Apparent Affordances of New Managerialism to Confront Masculine Norms

A glance at the history of universities shows that ‘they have not been models of enlightened organisational practice’ (Lynch, 2015: 193), therefore it may be argued that there is scope for managerialism as a lever to push gender equality using the new data management tools. Therefore one recommendation is to make the most of the opportunities that managerialism approaches can offer to promote gender equality: through developing gender sensitive leaders; promoting paternity leave and flexible work practices for men in higher education; and establishing gender audits linked to action plans.

An example of how this can be achieved is through improving gender equality training to senior management and university leadership. The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the UK has been championing gender equality in the sector through leadership programmes informed by feminist principles, especially the women-only leadership programme ‘Aurora’. The programme is explicitly focused on gender issues and aims to build a significant cohort of women in higher education who will champion gender equality as they develop their careers. The role of higher education leadership in promoting gender equality is crucial (Johnson et al., 2015).

Research by Rafnsdóttir and Heijstra (2013) in the Iceland HE context found that flexibility reinforces gendered division of domestic responsibilities. Mósesdóttir (2011: 36) suggests that so much attention has been placed on women – encouraging them into and staying in paid employment – but not ‘men’s long hours and lack of engagement in unpaid work’. This could appear to be outside the remit of organisational policies – interference into domestic arrangements; however, encouraging paternity leave for new fathers, opening up possibilities for flexible and part time work and encouraging the uptake of these for men may contribute to a situation where work policies can make an impact towards greater gender equality in the workplace. Perhaps as more men (and women) pursue an academic career following a non-linear model, the scope for more various paths to academic success will be broadened and properly recognised. Within this there is opportunities to develop broader definitions of academic excellence – emphasising the quality of published work rather than sole focus on quality of the journal or number of citations (Munir et al., 2014); likely contribution to research field and the ability to successfully compete for external research funding (than sole focus on level of funding to date); leadership quality; collegiality; and future potential.

Another example related to this is the Athena SWAN Charter. The Charter appears to take advantage of the already established audit culture and applies this using equality imperatives: departments and institutions applying for an award must collect, analyse and develop actions in response to gender disaggregated data. Athena SWAN is in line with ‘gender audits’ used in other countries (Austria for example), which successfully combine gender equality goals to managerialism approaches. A step further might be to include gender equality in auditing of performance of institutions and rankings. As part of the work

for Athena SWAN there are opportunities to establish bottom-up approaches that draw on support and experiences of feminist academics (Parsons & Priola, 2013). In this case there have been positive impacts of gender mainstreaming, especially when embracing managerialism (Ferree & Zippel, 2015), which leads to the question of how to advocate gender equality without being complicit in new managerialism regimes?

### **Tackling New Managerialism and Masculine Norms**

New managerialism has not been embedded without criticism or complaint: there are voices of dissent in academia that argue against the audit culture and what is seen as an attack on core academic values (autonomy for example). However, gender equality advocates may take a different stance in defending universities against new managerialism due to the history of exclusion in the sector (Deem, 1998).

One reason to tackle both is with regards to the veneer of equality new managerialism regimes afford to established practices that indirectly discriminate against women. This can lead to a situation where meritocracy and equality clash (Teelken and Deem, 2013): so by analysing the myth of meritocracy in academia for example, new managerialism and masculine norms may be undermined. Highlighting the subjective nature of much that is passed off as objective quality assessment and the biases that come to bear on quantitative measurements of performance is important for questioning that which is used in discourse as a given (O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2015).

Another aspect to consider is the impact of differences between disciplines and the differential power attributed to different disciplines in institutions and in relation to state funding. It is argued that quantification and rules of the game framed by disciplinary norms in the sciences for example, so a historian is judged according to expectations of a completely different gameplay (O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2015; see also Lamont, 2009). This is crucial when we consider the horizontal segregation of women in particular disciplines in higher education.

Finally, we argue that there is a need to identify appropriate spaces for alternative models to push forward, identifying where the gaps between new managerialism and masculine academic norms are and how gender equality advocates can best utilise the space as it opens up to argue for a more nuanced understanding of how academics can and do work and the values the higher education sector holds that are worth fighting for. In the UK's recent strike action (May 2016) debates of how managerialism may damage the sector and academics as a profession foregrounded gender equality arguments: a good strategy appears to be to embed gender mainstreaming in activism and opposition to managerialism as well as in higher education institutions' management processes.

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