What Works: Supporting Women's Careers

Full report authored by Media FHE

Summary authored by Dr Carla Startin, Researcher, Advance HE

Contents

1. Context

In 2016-17 Advance HE (formerly the Leadership Foundation), supported by the four UK higher education (HE) funding councils, commissioned work to inform strategies to improve practices in leadership, governance and management in HE, based on previous best evidence of 'what works'. This initial work found senior leaders in HE were enthusiastic for a 'what works' style approach to provide the sector with clear, robust and relevant evidence. Practical insights to enable decision making were also proposed, based on examples of good practice in other sectors, and considering how principles of effective initiatives could be applied to HE for maximum impact. Results of this first phase are summarised in the Leadership Foundation's What Works: The Concept report.

A second phase was designed to collate evidence from previous publications from the Leadership Foundation in greater depth. For this phase Media FHE was commissioned to review this evidence to provide insight relating to effective interventions in two areas: what works in supporting women's careers and what works in promoting positive cultural and behavioural change. This report is the first in a What Works series to summarise the results of this second phase, and will describe findings and recommendations related to effective interventions and initiatives to support women's careers.

2. Approach

Media FHE was commissioned to conduct a rapid review of a sample of publications from the Leadership Foundation to summarise the evidence relating to effective interventions in supporting women's careers. Key information was extracted from each publication, including:

+ Intervention theme

+ Type of evidence (for example survey, interviews, case studies)

+ Number of respondents and/or institutions

+ Intervention details

+ Any theoretical underpinnings

+ Details relating to intervention effectiveness and impact (where available)

Interventions were grouped by theme to facilitate their engagement, understanding and use within the HE sector. The themes identified and used in this project were unique to the context of the HE sector and the timing in which the Leadership Foundation released these publications. As such, it is likely that in future evaluations the identified themes will evolve to reflect changes in the sector over time. Details of the identified themes are given below.

3. Findings and recommendations

3.1 Summary

Review of the previous publications from the Leadership Foundation identified eight main interventions in supporting women's careers. These are listed below:

+ Using executive search firms or 'head hunters' to fill senior university posts

+ Promoting dedicated programmes to support women's careers and development

+ Allowing flexible working and encouraging a healthy work-life balance

+ Encouraging mentoring/coaching schemes

+ Providing equality training and guidance

+ Supporting career development and talent management
+ Motivating women
+ Collecting and analysing data for research

Details regarding each intervention and recommendations are given below.

3.2 Using executive search firms or 'head hunters' to fill senior university posts

3.2.1 Findings

Executive search firms, or 'head hunters', may be used by the HE sector to fill a wide range of senior roles, ranging from vice-chancellor to key professional positions. As well as searching their own networks, such firms consider recommendations from networks such as Women on Boards when identifying potential candidates.

A main strength of an approach using search firms is their ability to connect with a large number of potential candidates, including those who may not be actively seeking a position, who are more likely to be women. Further, within search firms there is an awareness of the strong focus in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on gender diversity, suggesting this may be taken into account when identifying candidates.

However, potential disadvantages to this initiative include the recycling of candidates and unintentionally creating a negative perception among candidates who have not been approached, both of which may lead to reinforcing a male bias.

3.2.2 Recommendations

Some HEIs have expressed reservations about the use of executive search firms to identify candidates for senior roles. To reduce such reservations, search firms should develop a code of practice with stakeholders to facilitate good practice and greater transparency. For example, the use of pro bono workshops aimed at women by search firms has been highlighted as a method for good practice.

In addition, as the search firms themselves influence decisions relating to equality, it is important for the HE sector to ensure there are sufficient checks and balances in contracts with these firms. The list of candidates shortlisted for leadership roles by search firms and their clients should consist of at least 30% females, and data regarding the proportion of female candidates suggested should be published. HEIs should also encourage search firms to focus on long term strategy, and firms should work with stakeholders to improve pipelines for identifying suitable candidates.

Ultimately, for maximum impact in supporting women's careers, it will be essential for HEIs to develop optimal interactions with search firms, and ensure they are obtaining the information they require for potential candidates.

3.3 Promoting dedicated programmes to support women's careers and development

3.3.1 Findings

Leadership and career development programmes including Aurora and the Top Management Programme (TMP) play an important role in supporting women's careers. Previous evaluations of the Aurora programme have highlighted its very significant positive effect on the careers of the women taking part, with the majority of attendees considering the programme to have increased their motivation to seek leadership roles, improved their social skills for leadership, and encouraged them to proactively manage their careers (Leadership

Foundation 2017). Objectively evaluating the impact of Aurora, women who have been involved are more likely to seek and gain promotion compared to women who have not been involved in the programme, potentially due to increased confidence. Attendees of the TMP reported increased self-awareness and confidence, with the networking opportunities to interact with peers offered by the programme and opportunities to reflect on their roles also being highlighted as perceived benefits (McCracken 2018; McCrory 2018; McHugh 2018). Clarifications on the nature of senior roles has also been highlighted as a benefit by the women who have participated.

While both Aurora and the TMP are based in the UK, there is also a strong international demand for dedicated programmes to support women's careers, for example attendees of the New Zealand Women in Leadership programme have also reported increased self-confidence and better developed networks.

Further to this, many female academics feel that they have benefitted from policies to improve women's representation through the Athena SWAN programme, particularly in fields relating to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The Athena SWAN programme encourages institution-wide changes to promote a positive culture for women's careers, and such a broad approach is likely to contribute towards the effectiveness and impact of the programme. A previous impact evaluation of Athena SWAN has linked the programme to an increase in gender representation (Equality Challenge Unit 2014), and a second impact evaluation is currently underway.

3.3.2   Recommendations

While leadership and career development programmes have demonstrated a positive impact on women's career development, institutional workplace culture and practices can still have a negative influence on women's willingness and confidence in seeking formally recognised leadership roles. Supporting this, in a nationally representative sample of UK STEM academics, a report from the Equality Challenge Unit (2017) showed that women were not only less likely to be in senior leadership roles, but also less likely to put themselves forward for such roles and have their career development supported by their department (for example by having a formally assigned mentor or access to senior departmental committees). In combination, these highlight the necessity of promoting change in institutional practices and culture to support women's careers, rather than taking a deficit approach to the issue and focusing on women changing themselves. Similarly, even for women who have attended leadership and career development programmes issues relating to work-life balance (as discussed below in section 3.4) can provide challenges to their career development, and so steps should be taken to address these potential issues. Other issues potentially limiting the impact of such programmes relate to women being unable to use the skills they developed as a part of the programme in their current role, or difficulties adjusting to a management position and its responsibilities. A final role for institutions relates to the adoption of clear criteria to identify and nominate staff for leadership programmes, and so criteria and available opportunities should be clearly communicated to all staff.

Considerations should also be given to other characteristics that women identify with that may also impact their careers, including race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, with a focus on 'women leaders' being too simplistic an approach. In addition, men should be involved in programmes to support women's careers, to improve education about some of the issues facing their female peers.

3.4   Allowing flexible working and encouraging a healthy work-life balance

3.4.1   Findings

Problems with the balance between home and working life for women in HE have been well documented, and despite the wide acknowledgement of this issue these problems persist. Women's caring responsibilities play a significant role in contributing to this issue, with women often building careers around these responsibilities. Female vice-chancellors are much less likely than their male counterparts to report being in a long term

relationship or to have children (Breakwell and Tytherleigh 2008), indicating the impact of caring responsibilities on women progressing to leadership roles.

While barriers to women's career development should not be considered limited to a role in childcare, this factor continues to have a major impact for many women, with women feeling great pressure to be good mothers and carers in addition to successful academics. Women are also more likely to undertake other caring responsibilities compared to men, meaning the issue around caring responsibilities is not limited to childcare. Caring responsibilities resulting in women choosing part-time work or a career break to balance the demands of paid and care work can also often negatively impact women's career progression.

Given the impact of caring responsibilities on women's careers, it should not be a surprise that flexible working arrangements are highly valued, including a provision and allowance for childcare and other caring responsibilities. Evidence from the use of interventions to address issues relating to caring responsibilities for women has supported the use of flexible working arrangements, meaning that women who are carers are not required to work outside of core hours, enabling the provision of on-campus childcare (with the use of childcare vouchers being highly valued), and offering staff returning from maternity leave a sabbatical.

3.4.2   Recommendations

All HE departments and institutions should consult all staff on policies to improve flexible working practices, and should apply examples of good practice. Institutions are recommended to have flexible policies for carers, including facilitating the ability to switch between full- and part-time work, and options to take paid and unpaid leave. Institutions should also develop a comprehensive care strategy which is reviewed regularly and objectives and action points updated as necessary.

While institutional policies that are family-friendly often indicate support for work-life balance at an organisational level, care should be taken by leadership teams that such policies do not exacerbate workload through unclear boundaries between work and care. Part-time workers, who are more likely to be women, are most affected by heavy workloads and long working hours, and so care should be taken that workloads for part-time staff are not disproportionate to the overall hours that they are expected to work. It is therefore important to raise awareness of such possible problems related to flexible working, as these problems can impact upon the wellbeing of staff concerned. To address issues relating to workloads, institutions should assess the impact of different workload models on staff with caring responsibilities.

Further, informal arrangements at a departmental level often depend upon the goodwill of line managers, some of whom are not supportive of carers. As such, implementing a formal policy at an institutional level can prevent issues of discrepancies depending on individual departments.

An increase in online resources would also be beneficial to address issues relating to caring responsibilities. HEIs should dedicate a specific webpage to provide information to staff regarding policies relating to caring responsibilities, and ensure this is advertised to all staff. Developing a website and carers' network hosted by a leading stakeholder would also be beneficial for the sector, and should include key information for both policymakers and individual carers based within HE.

3.5 Encouraging mentoring/coaching schemes

3.5.1   Findings

The existence of female role models in senior positions has been highlighted as raising aspirations for women, and also providing support for their careers. Schemes that build on this through mentoring or coaching opportunities are highly regarded in developing women's careers.

A majority of women with a mentor feel they benefit from the relationship, and women who do not have a mentor have higher expectations about the potential benefits of mentorship compared to men who do not have a mentor. The use of e-mentoring, allowing for use across different institutions and for relatively informal

mentorship, has been trialled with largely positive feedback (Leadership Foundation 2011), indicating mentoring schemes do not have to be limited to a formal setting within one institution.

However, while mentoring is viewed as a successful strategy to supporting the careers of academic women, there is relatively little evidence to how effective such schemes may be in actually helping female staff progress into leadership positions. In a recent project, Advance HE's research team searched through successful Athena SWAN applications to identify which gender equality initiatives in recruitment and promotion most frequently demonstrated a positive impact. One of the most frequently cited actions within these successful applications was having a mentoring or coaching scheme available to all or female staff, citing a positive impact on both satisfaction with the programme and feeling supported, as well as improved applications for promotion from female staff. Given the positive feedback of such schemes indicating a perceived benefit, their use should be encouraged.

3.5.2   Recommendations

Mentoring schemes need to be carefully designed to ensure maximum participation, levels of engagement, and impact. Barriers to sustained mentoring relationships, such as a lack of time, use of email to communicate rather than face-to-face conversations and difficulties in determining specific mentoring goals, should be accounted for. This may be done through the use of a mix of emails and face-to-face contact, with regular face-to-face meetings where possible, and developing clear guidelines on setting goals. Exchanging of detailed biographies is also recommended to maximise the benefits of the mentorship relationship.

3.6 Providing equality training and guidance

3.6.1   Findings

Perceptions of characteristics of being a female and characteristics of being a manager often produce prejudices that can impede women's career development. Firstly, women are evaluated less favourably to take on leadership roles compared to men, and secondly the behaviours of female leaders are evaluated less favourably compared to those of male leaders. Biases occur throughout all the stages of an academic career, with women's skills and competencies often not appropriately acknowledged. Supporting this, research by Moss-Racusin et al. (2012) indicated that an applicant for a laboratory manager position with a male name was rated as significantly more competent and hireable, and was offered a higher starting salary and more career mentoring, compared to an identical application with a female name.

Equality training and guidance can assist in combatting such biases through raising awareness and establishing codes of practice to enhance career opportunities for women and to overcome barriers such as unconscious bias. In particular, raising awareness of gender bias and equality issues among senior leaders and male staff can reduce biases, with the (often male) head of department being a key role for this. It is, however, important to frame gender inequality as an issue for both men and women rather than an issue primarily concerning women, based on findings that only the former increases men's collective action intentions, in particular in cases when the source of the message is male (Subašić et al. 2018).

The introduction of equality guidance and associated training has been viewed as having a positive impact on culture change, such as the Equality Impact Assessments required by the Research Evaluation Framework (REF) which allow institutions to monitor of rates of staff submitting to the REF and identify areas of concern and gender imbalances in particular disciplines. Highlighting such inequalities may lead to greater awareness of gender issues, which can then be used to identify and promote interventions to support women's careers.

3.6.2   Recommendations

Face-to-face equality training for all staff should be mandatory within HEIs to assist in raising awareness and tackling unconscious biases. Such training is particularly beneficial for research leaders and managers, in addition to governing boards and other key staff involved in senior appointments. Notably, similar to mentoring and coaching opportunities, having mandatory equality and diversity training for staff was one of the most

frequently mentioned recruitment and promotion initiatives uncovered in the Advance HE review of successful Athena SWAN applications (see Section 3.5).

Moreover, the integration of equality guidelines into research strategies at both departmental and institutional levels can assist in addressing inequalities. Institutions should also adopt clear equality criteria for identifying and nominating staff for leadership programmes, and ensure these are widely advertised and clearly communicated to staff.

Finally, the active involvement of women in decision-making roles will promote good practice and equality, such as appointing women who will champion equality in senior management roles, including vice-chancellors and pro-vice chancellors, and greater representation of women on decision making committees.

3.7 Supporting career development and talent management

3.7.1 Findings

The role of institutional support in career development and planning is thought to be highly beneficial. Current evidence relating to institutional support is somewhat lacking, though sector-wide programmes such as Aurora have a clear focus on career management for women. Women who have participated in Aurora engage in a high level of career management activity, with a greater impact for women in academic roles compared to professional service roles. Given the role of such programmes in supporting career development for women it is therefore important for institutions to offer similar support.

3.7.2 Recommendations

It is necessary for organisations to improve the confidence of women regarding applying for promotions and senior roles, as previous findings have indicated that strategies to identify talent do not necessarily work if the onus on applying for opportunities lies with individuals. Successful career development for senior management roles is supported by providing a broad range of career experience prior to application, usually in mid-career stages. It is also important for institutions to acknowledge contributions that may traditionally be less valued in academia, such as contributions to teaching, administration, and pastoral care, rather than focussing on research contributions and outputs. This is a particularly key consideration as both males and females view research-related tasks as being most important to career progression, yet females spend significantly more time on teaching, administrative, and pastoral tasks (Equality Challenge Unit 2017).

However, it is important to also consider that many women will choose not to progress to senior leadership positions. Instead, these women will spend many years in mid-career stages. For these women career development may be associated with developing in new areas. It is therefore essential to value female academics' current contributions and role in addition to their potential to move into leadership positions.

3.8 Motivating women

3.8.1 Findings

It is important to understand the motivations of women towards moving into senior management roles. Many women may welcome the opportunity to influence innovation and change from a senior level, however given the burden of responsibilities on senior HE managers and subsequent potential impact on work-life balance, it is also possible that some women choose not to apply for such roles (see sections 3.3 and 3.4). Any interventions to change the culture around supporting women's careers should therefore take account of differences in viewpoints between men and women relating to leadership roles and motivations relating to moving onto such roles.

Previous research has indicated a number of gender differences relating to motivation to applying for senior roles. While both men and women are motivated by a diverse range of factors, women tend to rate social factors as more important. Further, in general women consider quality of life in a department as more influential in their decision to take a job compared to men (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). While some of the factors that motivate women align with aspects that are valued and considered prestigious in academic life, particularly those relating to research, some factors are less recognised and valued by institutions, such as those relating to teaching. Interviews with women have revealed frustrations at this potential discrepancy between their motivations and those that are associated with recognition and reward.

In addition, it has been reported that while women may have a stronger desire to obtain a senior management post than men, expectations of obtaining such a post do not differ between males and females (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). This suggests many women are motivated to obtain these posts, despite the perceived barriers for success.

Research into gender differences relating to leadership style has indicated more masculine approaches focus on task-oriented leadership, whereas feminine approaches focus on relationship-oriented leadership. Such a relationship-oriented leadership approach has been found to be vital for business success in complex working environments, indicating a clear benefit to this approach in the HE sector. Despite this, stereotypical masculine characteristics have traditionally been associated with being a successful leader.

It is also important for recruiters and heads of human resources to acknowledge the risk of biases influencing recruitment and promotion processes, in particular relating to the way that 'merit' is constructed and candidates are judged. Research has also indicated that women tend to apply for posts where they feel they meet more of the criteria compared to men (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). This difference in perspective relating to applying for jobs will impact upon the candidates available for shortlisting, and subsequently may have an impact on appointments.

3.8.2   Recommendations

Institutions should consider what work is valued, and ensure all work that is considered less prestigious is shared fairly between males and females across all roles, including senior management. Institutions should also ensure job roles and responsibilities are clear, in particular relating to less prestigious tasks.

It is also recommended that institutions should develop rewards or recognition for collaborative working and team successes rather than focussing on individual achievements. This will facilitate the recognition of all contributions to successes.

3.9   Collecting and analysing data for research

3.9.1   Findings

It is important for institutions to collect comprehensive and up-to-date data and research relating to women's careers in HE to provide evidence for actions and programmes aimed at introducing changes. Data can be a powerful tool for change, especially when scrutinised by senior leaders. While diversity data is frequently collected it is often not actively used to understand potential issues. For example, it is important to look at the movement of staff between posts in addition to the numbers in each post. Initiatives like Advance HE's Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charter aim to address this issue by not only requiring institutions and departments to collect equality data but also to take an honest and transparent approach to uncovering what the data says about their context and the issues within. Additional resources and guidance related to monitoring and evaluating equality data are also available from Advance HE's research team.

The collection of reliable data across institutions and countries will provide valuable information regarding potential barriers encountered by women who have leadership positions, in addition to potential inequalities which prevent large numbers of women from entering these roles.

3.9.2   Recommendations

Current research has tended to focus on barriers to career development for women, in particular relating to advancement in leadership roles. It will be important for future research to also consider women who have spent prolonged periods of time in senior leadership roles. This will provide important information relating to successful cases of women gaining these roles and facilitating changes.

The creation of a global database on female professors and managers will provide a useful source of information relating to understanding the potential barriers women face. It is also important for quality audits to include gender statistics to understand potential issues relating to women's careers, and for future research to consider the experiences of female leaders and factors that facilitate and provide obstacles to women's career progression.

4. Summary

While there is an awareness of barriers to women's careers within the HE sector, and several effective programmes to support women's careers exist including Aurora, the Top Management Programme, and Athena SWAN, significant gender differences remain relating to career progression. A number of approaches may help to address this imbalance, including the use of executive search firms to fill senior university posts and policies to enable flexible working and a healthy work-life balance. Institutional support for encouraging women's career progression, including the continued support and promotion of dedicated programmes to support women's careers and development, such as mentoring/coaching schemes, will be of further benefit, as will ensuring all staff are aware of gender biases through the provision of mandatory equality training and guidance. It is also important to better understand how women's motivations at work may relate to their roles and responsibilities, and to collect and analyse data relating to career progression to better understand some of the issues women may face. Recommendations detailed within this report will assist in better supporting women's careers, enabling some of the barriers facing women to be addressed, and therefore allowing for greater equality.

5. References

Breakwell GM and Tytherleigh MY (2008). The characteristics, roles and selection of vice-chancellors. Leadership Foundation; available from https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/components/publication.cfm/S1-10

Equality Challenge Unit (2014). Evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the Athena SWAN charter. Available from https://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/external/evaluating-the-effectiveness-and-impact-of-the-athena-swan-charter.pdf

Equality Challenge Unit (2017). ASSET 2016: experiences of gender equality in STEMM academia and their intersections with ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and age. Available at http://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ECUs-ASSET-report-November-2017.pdf

Leadership Foundation (2011). Women E-Mentoring in Lifelong Learning (WELL). Available at https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/research-hub/small-development-projects/sdp2011/uwe-po.cfm

Leadership Foundation (2017). Onwards and upwards? Tracking women's working experiences in higher education; year 2 report. Available from https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/programmes-events/equality-and-diversity/aurora/the-longitudinal-study/index.cfm

McCracken M (2018). Leadership isolation: it's lonely up here! Available from https://lf4he.blog/2018/04/24/leadership-isolation-its-lonely-up-here/

McCrory M (2018). Growing at the top – developing self-awareness and confidence. Available from https://lf4he.blog/2018/06/15/growing-at-the-top-developing-self-awareness-and-confidence/

McHugh M (2018). Time to think: leaders and the opportunity to reflect. Available from
https://lf4he.blog/2018/06/12/time-to-think-leaders-and-the-opportunity-to-reflect/

Moss-Racusin CA, Dovidio JF, Brescoll VL, Graham MJ, and Handelsman J (2012). Science faculty's subtle
gender biases favor male students. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A 109(41):16474-9. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1211286109

Subašić E, Hardacre S, Elton B, Branscombe NR, Ryan MK, and Reynolds KJ (2018). "We for She": Mobilising
men and women to act in solidarity for gender equality. Group Process Interg 21(5): 707-724. doi:
10.1177/1368430218763272

AdvanceHE

Contact us

+44 (0) 3300 416 201
enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk
www.advance-he.ac.uk
🐦 in f @AdvanceHE