

## *'Loaded dice?': Barriers to women's progression*

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### **Abstract**

This pilot study sought to examine the perceptions of women academics at BU towards possible gendered barriers to progression that they may have experienced during their academic careers, together with a consideration of possible solutions. The study followed in the wake of an earlier Women's Academic Network (WAN) survey of members, where blocks to progression appeared to be a dominant concern. Accordingly three focus group discussions were held with WAN voluntary participants to explore the topic in more detail.

A range of outcomes are anticipated from this study. Firstly, it offers some useful thematic findings from BU academic staff to begin to develop a dialogue within BU, involving the University Executive Team and Human Resources, with a view to raising greater awareness of barriers that may have a gendered component. The recommendations from this study can assist BU in developing its ambitions to create a more gender-sensitive working environment facilitating institutional change towards developing a more equal gendered playing field. In turn this is likely to assist the University in relation to its initiatives towards achieving Athena Swan status at institutional and faculty levels. In addition the findings emerging from this study will be used to develop a peer-reviewed journal paper. Finally, the study provides a useful springboard to develop a larger project encompassing other HEIs both national and international.

### **Executive Summary**

This pilot study followed on from the earlier informal Women's Academic Network<sup>†</sup> (WAN) survey of members, where women members identified particular barriers to career progression as having a particular gendered component. In the survey this related broadly to the perceived dichotomy where

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† The WAN network was formed in 2012 as a non-corporate, academic nexus for women academics at BU/and currently has 110 members, with more recruits added to our numbers monthly.

women academics tended to shoulder the programme administrative tasks, as being seen as particularly suited to women, leaving the research domain dominated by male colleagues – with the clear implication that the latter domain is regarded more highly as a stepping stone to career progression, than the former domain more commonly populated by women colleagues.

In this study we posed the following Research Questions as the basis for this small, qualitative study:

1. What barriers to progression do women academics at BU experience during their careers? How are the implications and impact of these perceived?
2. How do participants identify positive solutions that might facilitate change based on these experiences?

Following the submission of ethics approval, which was commended for its quality, and the development of an interview schedule and information sheet, a number of calls were put out to recruit WAN.

members with a view to holding four focus group discussions. Ultimately, however, it was only possible to hold three FGD as the fourth was collapsed in the third owing to logistical problems.

Thus between April and July the FGD were held with a total of XXX

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**Methods:** This pilot study will explore the experiences of academic women drawn across BU Faculties through 4 focus-group discussions (FGD), where 5-8 women participants will be recruited for each facilitated group. Recruitment will take place via the current WAN network. Additionally invitations to participate will be sent out to female Faculty members via the BU Research Blog to ensure that all potentially eligible participants are reached.

**Analysis:** will be carried out using thematic coding techniques of transcribed interviews in accordance with ethnographic methodology, where FGD forms part

of the ethnographic toolkit of methods. Both researchers are experienced qualitative researchers with expertise in ethnographic work, FGD and qualitative data analysis.

**Ethical:** Participation will be entirely voluntary and anonymous. Although the two researchers have some organisational authority as co-convenors of the WAN network, there will be no attempt to coerce members to volunteer. Interviews will be subject to the BU codes of ethics concerning confidentiality, right to withdrawal, data protection and other such stipulations as mandated. This study may cause some upset in certain participants owing to distressing experiences recounted. However, precautions will be established prior to the interviews to ensure that appropriate emotional support is extended to participants in that eventuality. Furthermore, we would contend that the predominant ethical dilemma relates to *not* conducting this research, which moves beyond the principle of doing 'no harm' to actively promoting gender equality, and a fair and just academic environment that will benefit not only current academic staff but future staff and their students.

### **Introduction and background to the study**

UK female faculty experience slower career progress and are more likely to leave the path of academic advancement than male colleagues, as reported in the *Times Higher Education* and *Nature*. BU's HR show a gender split of 50/50 between male and female academics yet women are seriously under-represented at professoriate level. Academic career trajectories are conventionally based on research and enterprise, domains dominated by men; while for female academics the balance of academic tasks is weighted towards teaching roles as the 'new housework'<sup>‡</sup>. BU's Equality & Diversity Department identify a lack of role models as one of many barriers hindering female academic progress. An informal survey by the cross-University BU Women's Academic Network notes that blocks to women's academic progression are a dominant area of staff discontent. Although gender inequity is statistically noted at BU regarding progression and REF returns, identifying blocks to progression is essential for improved staff satisfaction, the achievement of the BU 2018 strategic

### **Outcomes and recommendations**

#### **Lit review**

##### **Literature Review**

Research from Australia and around the world showed some of longstanding problems for the career trajectories of women in academia, such as ingrained sex

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<sup>‡</sup> † Grove, J., 2013. Why are there so few female vice-chancellors? *Times Higher Education*. 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2013. Found at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/why-are-there-so-few-female-vice-chancellors/2006576.article>. [Accessed 11/7/14]

segregation both within and across disciplines (North-Smardzic and Gregson, 2011).

An article expressed that women experienced different sources of stress and dissatisfaction that were not identified by the male counterparts, and they aspired to be like male colleagues, would require that they slant their careers more toward research than toward teaching (Hunter and Shannon, 1987).

Wright et al. revealed the result that showed significant gender differences in faculty salaries, ranks, tracks, leadership positions, resources, and perceptions of academic life in the US College of Medicine (2003). According to this study, on average women, earned 11 per cent less than men, after adjusting for rank, track, degree, specialty, years in rank, and administrative positions. 62 per cent of female faculty were assistant professors, while 55 per cent of male faculty were promoted and tenured. A third of women reported being discriminated against, compared with only 5 per cent of men.

The other study which took place in the U.S. examined the impact of the hierarchy, including both the organization's hierarchical structure and professionals' perceptions of this structure. The results indicated that many faculties considered hierarchy as affecting inclusion, reducing transparency in decision making, and impeding advancement. Both men and women faculty perceived this hierarchy, but women saw it as more consequential (Conrad, et al., 2010).

Esnard et al., emphasise the importance of mentoring networks and social capital in women's academic career progression and in the process of overcoming the obstacles encountered. They advance the need for structured and constructive engagement of our differences in building the social capital of peer mentoring networks and that it requires fluid and ongoing negotiations of relationships if collective goals are to be noticed (Esnard, et al., 2015)

Johnsrud and Wunsch, in their study explored empirically the perceptions of senior and junior faculty women regarding the barriers to success experienced early in the academic career (1991). It was found that junior faculty women are more likely than faculty men to leave their academic institutions prior to tenure decisions and, they are less likely than men to be tenured. Johnsrud and Wunsch (1991) suggested that efforts to enable the success of junior faculty women must begin with their socialization and orientation to the institution.

A paper assessed changes over a five year period (1986-1991) in the administrative hierarchy comparing changes between internal and external hiring between public and private institutions, and identify any emerging career pathways for women, reported that number of female appointments have increased but the hiring institution has shifted from public to private. In both years women still predominate at the directorship level, a supportive staff position outside the policy making academic hierarchy (Twale, 1992).

Zhang, intended to gain an understanding of the sources of stress among women academics in research universities of China. Study showed that, compared with

their male counterparts, women have higher level of stress in work/family conflicts, gender barriers and career development. They experience more conflicts between work and family than their male counterparts. Women perceive the demands of career development as more stressful than males do. The three items that females feel more stressed about than males are research productivity, extending their knowledge, and unsatisfactory progress in their career. Same study shows that women academics are having difficulties in “getting into male networks”, “social stereotypes of women”, and “gender discrimination in promotion” (2010).

Women in Malaysia possess higher education qualification and experience more than men; however, the number of women having higher managerial positions is less than men. Yazreen et al., investigate the existence of barriers that prevent women from filling up the top management positions and how these perceived barriers affect their job performance in Malaysia. Lack of mentorship was found to be the major factor that bars women from achieving a high managerial positions (Yazreen, et al., 2011).

Carr et al., indicated that women in four decades comprise 20 per cent of full-time faculty. Despite this, women have not reached senior positions in parity with men (2015). According to Carr et al., five important themes are, “a perceived wide spectrum in gender climate”, “lack of parity in rank and leadership by gender”, “lack of retention of women in academic medicine”, “lack of gender equity in compensation”, and “a disproportionate burden of family responsibilities and work-life balance on women’s career progression”.

Bhatia et al., reported that women graduate in equal numbers from medical school as men, but comprise less than half of academic faculties. Women’s rate of promotion and appointment to leadership roles fall significantly behind their male counterparts. Their attrition rate is higher than men, and the reasons for this are lack of perceived positive role models and insufficient support, mentorship and preparation (2015).

Howell et al., conducted a research to identify areas for targeted interventions that can advance academic and leadership development of women faculty by examining sex differences in career satisfaction in U.S. medical school pathology departments using the Faculty Forward Engagement Survey (2014). According to Faculty Forward Engagement Survey, women report more time in patient care and less time in research. Women consider formal mentorship feedback, and career advancement more important than men do and are less satisfied with communication and governance. The survey shows that 20 per cent to 40 per cent of non-chair department leaders are women, and more than half of chairs report satisfaction with the sex diversity of their departmental leaders.

Twenty-year trends in women and underrepresented minority (URM) pharmacy faculty representation were examined, and regarding demographics, job satisfaction, their academic pharmacy career, and relationships between demographics and satisfaction were analyzed. The results showed the number of

women faculty members more than doubled between 1989 and 2009, while the number of URM pharmacy faculty members increased only slightly over the same time period. Even though women faculty members indicated they were generally satisfied with their jobs, the academic rank of professor, being a non-pharmacy practice faculty member, being tenured/tenure track were found with significantly lower satisfaction with little benefits. Women faculty members who were tempted to leave academia had significantly lower salary satisfaction and overall job satisfaction, and indicated their expectations of academia did not match their experiences (Spivey et al.,2012).

It was reported by Carnes et al., that despite the equality of men and women, subtle gender bias persists, and compelling women's opportunities for academic advancement (2015). In the study they pointed out, the interventions that facilitate intentional behavioural change can help faculty break the gender bias habit, and change department climate in ways that should support the career advancement of women. It is important to change interventions not only to increase awareness of problematic behaviours but must motivate individuals to practice new behaviours.

A study about the career progression of a cohort of UK medical graduates in mid-career, comparing men and women reported differences between men and women (Svirko et al., 2014); within hospital specialties, a higher percentage of men than women were in surgery, and a higher percentage of women than men were in paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology, clinical oncology, pathology and psychiatry. In the NHS, 63 per cent of women and 8 per cent of men were working less-than-full-time. Among doctors who had always worked full-time, 94 per cent of men and 87 per cent of women were GP principals: in hospital practice, 96 per cent of men and 93 per cent of women had reached consultant level.

Peterson states that Sweden has the highest percentage of female university Vice Chancellors in Europe. However, the paper reveals some of the challenges facing manager-academics, such as increasing workload, role conflict and decreasing status and prestige (2014). The study argues that women who are in management positions in higher education, as these positions decline in status, merit and prestige and become more time consuming and harder to combine with a successful career.

In the study McBride, tried to assess the impact of certain forms of workforce modernization in the National Health Service in England, and made a particular emphasis on the implications of these changes for women's workplace education, training, and job progression. The study shows, while workplace education and training has the most potential to facilitate women's access to qualifications and job progression, their advancement in the workplace stay obstructed, and the paper also illustrates how managers can create different career pathways of areas of workforce shortage while line managers encouraged women's participation through workplace education and training (2011).

There is evidence to suggest that women experience barriers to career progression in many professions. An article examines women's career aspirations and perceptions of their opportunities for promotion among a large sample of lawyers found that women with strong aspirations for advancement to partnership did not necessarily eschew the need for a balanced life-style. All female lawyers perceived that their opportunities for promotion were constrained (Walsh, 2012).

According to a far-reaching research study by MWM Consulting, the board advisory and search firm that acts for some of the world's largest companies, Major businesses are not doing enough to improve the career progression of women executives, in contrast with recent progress in appointing female non-executive board directors (PR Newswire Europe, 2012).

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**Findings**

**References**

## **Appendix 1**

### **Focus Group Discussion interview schedule**

#### **1. What kinds of career barriers have you experienced during your time at BU as a woman academic?**

- Did you feel these barriers had a gendered component or not really?
- Are they still going on or have they been resolved?
- Have these differed from those experienced in other HEIs you have worked at?

#### **2. What other gendered barriers have you become aware of in your academic career towards women academics?**

- Where, what and when?

#### **3. What is the impact of these barriers in your opinion?**

- Professionally? Personally? Both, other ways – like impact on family?
- Impact on the institution? In your faculty or academic groups etc.?
- Did anything positive come out of your experience?

#### **4. What kinds of ways forward would help to overcome or deal with gendered barriers at BU?**

- What helped you?
- What others ideas/suggestions might you offer?

#### **5. Finally what advice might you offer to other women facing gendered barriers in academia?**

**Thank you for your time**