Chapter 74

"We Don't Have the Key to the Executive Washroom":
Women's Perceptions and Experiences of Promotion in Academia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a pilot study looking at the progression of academic women at one UK University. The chapter focuses on the promotions process and criteria as one important issue emerging from that research. Earlier research has shown that women are less likely to break into institutional networks which allow them to access information not only on formal and objective promotion criteria but also on hidden criteria and the way the 'academic game' is played. One result of this is that some academic women may have an inaccurate view of promotion criteria and processes. At the university studied by the authors, the Human Resources department has sought to make the promotion process more transparent and, officially at least, it no longer depends purely upon research achievements. However, these changes will not necessarily result in easier progression for women academics. The authors' study confirms that there is still a mismatch between what women think the criteria for promotion are, what the formal criteria are and how those criteria actually operate. Reliance on incomplete or inaccurate information about promotion criteria, coupled other factors, such as women's reluctance to promote themselves actively and traditional barriers to promotion such as caring responsibilities, puts women at a disadvantage when they attempt to progress into more senior positions within universities. Reform of promotions procedures needs to look beyond re-writing the substantive criteria for promotion and look to improving understanding of what is involved.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This chapter is based on the findings of a small scale research study carried out in 2008. The study considered the progression of women in higher education and focused on academic staff at the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom. The research outlined the European and national law relevant to this area before examining the university's own policies in detail. The majority of the study then focused on the lived experience of academics at the University exploring issues around promotion and progression, work life balance, mentoring and perception of policies amongst others through in-depth empirical work comprised of semi-structured interviews with male and female academics employed at the University (n=30). In addition to the interviews, some basic analysis was also made of statistics provided by the university. While the study did not specifically concentrate on the SET (science, engineering, and technology) disciplines, many of our respondents did in fact fall in that category. We interviewed academics in the engineering design and technology department as well as colleagues from life sciences, informatics, psychology and the school of health. Out of a total of 30 respondents, 17 were from SET disciplines while the others came from disciplines such as law, management, social sciences and languages. However, the analysis of our data showed no differences in responses by discipline.

This chapter focuses on one of the key themes emerging from the research: the promotions process in Higher Education. The emphasis is on promotion within and between the Lecturer and Senior Lecturer grades. This is partly because it was those promotions that most of our respondents talked about and also because these decisions are made internally, whereas assessors from other universities are involved with promotions to Reader and Professor. Promotions criteria in Higher Education are supposed to be transparent and clear to those employed in relevant institutions. The Higher Education Role Analysis (HERA) used to define roles within universities in the UK is supposed to allow "employers [] to ensure their pay and grading structures are designed to recognize the value of roles and ensure equal pay for work of equal value" (Educational Competencies Consortium Ltd 2007 (ECC)). A national role analysis was carried out, resulting in the development of national role profiles in UK Higher Education. These can be mapped onto a single national pay spine to ensure fairness and equality across the sector as a whole. The University of Bradford has adopted the single pay spine and the associated role descriptors. However this research casts doubts on the transparency of criteria and role profiles and the extent to which they are made explicit to university staff and/or applied consistently. In addition, as Deem and Morley (2006) note "although this methodology may deliver equal pay for equal work, […] it may also restrict promotion opportunities since these often now depend on moving to a new job rather than upgrading an existing one" (p190).

The move to a single pay spine might also explain why we detected no disciplinary differences within our data. Academics working in SET disciplines are subject to exactly the same promotions criteria as those working in the social sciences and humanities and as such they have very similar views of those criteria and processes. Nonetheless the empirical work presented here takes as its focus those interviews conducted with colleagues in the SET disciplines.

The chapter first considers academics' perceptions of what the promotion process involves and their experiences in planning for and applying for promotion. It then turns to the university administration's own explanation of what the promotions process requires and involves. These are discussed, along with some "hidden" criteria for promotion. We then consider the implications of some significant differences we found between participants' and managers' understanding of the promotions process. We will conclude that it is

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