

**Women's under-representation in the  
university sector:  
an exploration of the gendered nature of  
academic leadership**

**Prof Colette Fagan and Dr Nina Teasdale**

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## Presentation Outline

- Project Background
- Literature Overview
- Policy context: Athena SWAN
- Project Methodology
- Key findings
- Conclusions



# Project Context and Questions

- Draws on a case study of a large, research intensive university.
- To explore the career paths into leadership of successful senior STEM and non-STEM female academics;
- their leadership experiences; and to understand some of the

(structural and cultural) enablers and barriers of their particular organisational settings and how these shape their experiences of leadership and diversity



# Project Background: Statistical Picture

- Women constitute nearly half (47%) of non-professorial academic staff (ECU 2014), while BME academics across the sector hold 13% of these academic posts..

## SOME GROUND GAINED AT SENIOR MANAGEMENT LEVEL?

- **Women Professors:** 22.3% of professorial positions now held by women compared with 7% twenty years ago; while BME academics hold 9.8% of professorial posts. Of these only 1.3% of BME Professors are women (ECU, 2015).
- **Vice-chancellors:** 20.5% of VC's are women, up from 14% five years ago (ECU, 2015) .
  - However, very few VCs or principals are from a minority ethnic background - the first BME women VC appointed in July 2015.
- **Vertical Segregation varies by discipline:** In the UK, women account for 18.5% of STEM Professors, while they make up more of the professors in the humanities – 28.1% .
  - Still limited progress for women in such disciplines at the most senior levels.
  - Particularly acute in maths, engineering, computing , physics, and economics and philopshy

# Research Literature: Barriers to Gender Equality

Individual Barriers: Supply-Side arguments	Organisational/Societal Barriers
<p><b>Skills &amp; Qualifications</b> While women have historically developed human capital to a less extent than men, the opposite is now the case (Sealy et al. 2009).</p>	<p><b>Gendered organisational structures &amp; cultures:</b> ideal full-time worker model; culture of long working hours, esp in lab based discipline; job all-consuming; ‘old boys’ club and gendered promotion panels &amp; appointment committees - with male-dominated panels traditionally tending to recruit in their own ‘image’</p>
<p><b>Professional Confidence</b></p>	<p><b>Gendered nature of caring responsibilities</b> Complex interplay between gender divisions in the home and the workplace. Early stages of academic career often coincides with parenthood.</p>
<p><b>Aspirations &amp; Ambitions</b> Studies suggest women aspire to senior positions (Sealy et al. 2008). But are highly aware of the challenges.</p>	<p><b>Unconscious bias and gendered stereotypes :</b> ‘think scientist, think man’; ‘think leadership, think man’ Women face role incongruity – having to grapple with being ‘female’ and ‘technical’ or ‘female’ and ‘leaders’</p>
	<p><b>Practicalities of academic &amp; science careers:</b> short-term; fixed contracts; competitive environment – publication portfolio &amp; securing funding key promotion metrics based on an unremitting career – especially difficult if you take maternity leave or work part-time; international travel &amp; relocation</p>

# #Distractinglysexy : Tim Hunt's comments

- Tim Hunt, a biochemist, Nobel Laureate, and Fellow of the Royal Society resigned following comments he made at a conference in South Korea:

“the trouble with “girls” is that they cause men to fall in love with them and cry when criticised’.





- Practical scheme introduced in 2005: to improve women's representation in STEMM careers.
- Currently 133 Athena SWAN members and 483 Athena SWAN award holders.
- Three level of awards: Bronze, Silver and Gold
- Since 2011, funding for biomedical research linked to Athena SWAN Silver Award
- Scheme has had a demonstrable positive impact but parity yet to be achieved.
  
- **Recent Developments:**
  - ECU: Gender Equality Charter Mark and Race Charter Mark
  
- While Athena SWAN has done much good work, there is still more to be done to ensure Athena leads to fundamental organisational change.

# Methodology

➤ **Case study institution:** University of Manchester – a large research intensive , Russell Group, university.

➤ **Qualitative research: STEM and Humanities**

## Professors

➤ Semi-structured interviews:

**20** semi-structured telephone/face-to-face interviews with female STEM Professors

**11** telephone interviews with humanities Professors.

➤ Digitally recorded and transcribed in full



# Pathways into Leadership



➤ **Promotions applied for when advised by others:**

*'I think that women don't put themselves forward...women see the things they can't do and men see the things they can....' (interview 6).*

➤ **Advancement perceived as slower than some of their (male) peers**

➤ Descriptions of careers: 'drifting' v career planning and *'learning to play the 'promotions' game'*

➤ **Significance of STEMM leadership course**

# Pathways into Leadership: Significance of Support

- **Significance of support and mentors:** support pivotal to success
- Emphasis on 'long-term' relationships and support networks (often PhD supervisors )
- STEM interviewee: *'...certainly people who seem to have got on ...have sought their own mentor, their own peer support and people they work well with and keep close too'*
- Emphasis on relationship building; invisible but key to success
- Support at home: supportive partners (strong support structures / role reversal)



# Departmental & Organisational Culture(s)

- **Academic culture:** as 'flexible': yet competitive, heavy workloads.

Promotion metrics as 'gendered' : publications/funding focused

- **Attitudes to Athena SWAN:** tick box exercise and still perceived as a 'woman's issue' – Policy Implementation Gap

- **Gender: Passé?**

**STEMM interviewee:** *'...if I was being brutally honest, I would still say there's a lot of sexism...*

*We've got to get a lot more women through,  
but there are still old boy networks. Whether we like it  
or not we're a long way off changing the world in that  
respect.*



- **Influence of male-dominated / female-dominated contexts**

## Conclusions

- Despite some gains in terms of numbers and despite initiatives to redress the issue, gender inequality in academia persists.
- Some fields, however, are doing better than others. Perceptions that ‘things’ are better in humanities. But is this the case? Indeed, there is still a long way to go for women in both STEM and humanities in terms of achieving 50:50 parity.
- Securing gender balanced representation is not simply a deficit issue— academic culture needs to change, and action is required from men as well as women. This is not simply a women’s issue.
- Deep-rooted change is needed and Athena SWAN has a critical role to play in the drive for this and to keep the sector focused on this goal.

