

# **WOMEN IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR – CONFRONTING THE ISSUES FOR ACADEMICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

By

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### **Introduction and Background**

This report details the findings of a small scale research study carried out by staff of the Bradford University Law School. The study considered the progression of women in higher education and focused on academic staff at the University of Bradford. 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.

The research strategy of this project employed a socio-legal methodology. It involved the analysis of law and policy from institutional to European level. This analysis was then complemented with in-depth empirical work comprising 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.

The situation of academics in the UK has been considered before, and the issues arising from the literature are perhaps not surprising. We do not intend to provide a literature review here but suffice it to say for the purposes of setting the context, that the majority of issues arising from this research project are issues of which there is already some discussion in the literature. Factors such as family responsibilities and career breaks, networks, a 'male' model of success and a meritocracy based on that model are all examined and it is clear that the issue of gender equality in academia remains on the agenda.

### **The Findings: Law and Policy**

The Equality Act of 2006 places a general duty on all public authorities, when carrying out their functions, to eliminate discrimination and harassment that is unlawful under the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975); and promote equality of opportunity between men and women.

'Confronting inequality: Celebrating diversity' is the University of Bradford's equality strap line. The equality policies and schemes reflect this commitment to promoting equality. The policies examined as part of this study were found to be comprehensive and well thought out. The gender equality scheme is well supported by a number of other policies dealing with issues such as harassment and bullying as well as maternity, paternity and adoption leave and flexible working. Other policies which may impact on progression are those relating to promotions procedures. We found the information to be available on the personnel section of the Human Resources website but the information was not easy to navigate and lacked transparency.

### **The Findings: The Experience of University of Bradford Academic Staff**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, statistics we were provided with by the University show that the most marked gender differences arise at the more senior level. Out of the 444 members of academic staff below professorial grade 43% (189) are female. At Professor level, however, only 24 % are female. At Senior Lecturer level the proportion of women is 35%, and at Reader 12%. At Lecturer level however the genders are almost evenly split with women making up 49% of the total.

The university also supplied the figures for the promotions round held in 2007. More men (87) applied for promotion than women (59) and men were more likely to be successful. 74% of men who applied were granted a promotion whereas only 66% of women were successful. No breakdown by job family or level of seniority was available to us; we therefore have not analysed the data by schools as they are unlikely to provide further useful insights.

The main purpose of this study was, however, not to conduct detailed statistical analysis but rather to gain an insight into the experience of staff at the institution. Even the brief figures given above indicate that women face barriers to progression. Further analysis by schools also reveals that women are generally underrepresented in the more senior positions even though there are some discipline areas that are highly feminised.

As part of this project the research team interviewed 30 academics from across the institution including a range of levels of seniority and subject disciplines. While it must of course be recognised that there are disciplinary differences and that different factors are likely to affect people differently as they progress through their life course and career trajectory, a number of common themes emerged.

### Promotions Process and Criteria

In order to get a picture of what academics at the University of Bradford considered to be a good academic and thus paint a picture of those attributes and characteristics that people valued in their colleagues and the standards they were measuring themselves against, we asked respondents about their 'ideal' academic. It is clear that there was no single picture of an ideal academic, and different people placed their emphasis on different skills. Interestingly the idea of a good academic or an ideal academic did not necessarily map onto what our respondents thought was the public perception of academics. Jessica<sup>1</sup> captures this well:

*Someone who's really clever ... I don't know, I think the image of academics is that they're straight laced, a little bit stiff, a little bit unapproachable, often male*

[Jessica, Senior Lecturer, Female]

A further reason for asking about academics' own image of the 'good academic' was that we wanted to find out to what extent this corresponded with the characteristics and skills that are considered and rewarded in the promotions process. However, investigation of this issue was somewhat hampered by the difficulty of getting an accurate picture of the University's promotion criteria.

The personnel website of the University of Bradford devotes quite a significant amount of web space to promotion-related matters. However, we got a strong sense that academics across the university felt daunted by the complexity of the promotions process and that although information is available it is not easy to navigate and make sense of. This was further compounded by some concerns that the personnel department was not giving potential applicants for promotion sufficient time or assistance in completing the complex paper work.

*Researcher: How did you, did you find the criteria?*

*I think it's still written in gobbledegook, I'm a plain speaker. I just find it really interesting that on the one hand the institution is saying that they want people to apply for a promotion, they advertise that this is going to happen. The information session run by the institution was a week before submission. So those 2 things do not go hand in hand. So they're saying one thing, when they actually mean something totally different. And that, that's my impression. If you really, really want to support people to do something you don't give them the information a week before, the amount of evidence that they want needs to go in, even down to when you've got to write your list of publications. We use Harvard referencing here, that's not Harvard referencing, so I had to redo it all.*

[Shannon, Lecturer, Female]

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all our respondents have been changed in order to ensure their anonymity

The second issue arising in relation to the promotions process at the university was that respondents' perception of what the promotions criteria are varies enormously not just from school to school but also within schools and departments. We detected what might be a mismatch between what people thought the criteria were, what the criteria actually were and how the criteria then operated on the ground.

*There's a phenomenal repeat message from the females about how they went for promotion and they have the most research and you know, everything else they outperform guy X and guy X got the job and they asked for feedback and none of them got feedback. So I think the criteria might be different or the experience of the criteria might be different between the male academic and female*

[Nicole, Junior, Female]

### Work Life Balance Issues

Overall we got a clear sense of a long hours culture still being prevalent within the institution and those who managed to work a "standard" working week were few and far between. Many of our respondents alluded to difficulty of clearly separating work and private life. Many felt that there were significant overlaps between the two. However, many respondents still felt that they had not managed to find the right balance between the amount of work they were doing and their other responsibilities and interests. This situation seems to be exacerbated in situations where the member of staff also has caring or family responsibilities.

In some cases the issue of caring responsibilities was associated with child care and in particular the care of very young children and maternity leave. In the course of the interviews we heard many comments in relation to maternity leave issues. Many of our female respondents who have yet to embark on having a family were concerned about maternity leave entitlement and how they could balance that with maintaining a career and how they would be able to come back to work. These concerns were borne out when talking to female academics who have had children and had experience of maternity leave either here or at other institutions. Overall there was a feeling that the university was not particularly good at supporting expecting and new mothers

*There was a lot to do with maternity leave but just didn't seem to work*

[Michelle, Lecturer, Female]

Many had faced 'battles' about their status and working hours on their return or the workload they were expected to pick up. There were also comments about the lack of adequate maternity cover which meant that respondents often were still involved with work while they were actually on leave or that they had to return to work on part time pay with very similar responsibilities as they had had before.

### Leadership, Mentoring, Role Models and Networks

Many of our respondents talked about the importance of having support, strong and positive leadership, mentoring, role models and the management of staff. One of the perceived problems with the promotions criteria and process was the lack of transparency as discussed above. There was a sense that some of that could be overcome if the academic was well managed. Poor leadership and management as well as a lack of mentoring and role models could however exacerbate the situation

The top level in the university hierarchy was repeatedly talked about as male dominated and was seen as an old boys' network. Promotion, certainly into senior management level positions was seen as heavily influenced by being part of the right network. In some cases there was a very strong feeling that the network was more important than the people's skills and qualifications making it even more difficult for others to break into the network and progress. April captures the gendered dimension of networks well:

*I think men have better connections. I think men like men, men socialise with men, men get on with men better and they talk about football matches. When it comes to promotion and getting work done, the men will support the men. That's a very blunt thing to say but I think it's true.*

[April, Lecturer, Female]

However, there was also recognition that networking can be important and is a legitimate part of the academic job and that it was not networking in itself that was problematic but the exclusory effect networks can sometimes have.

### Gendered Approaches to Work and Promotion

We were interested in the comments about a gendered approach to career progression and as part of the interview we discussed with respondents their own approaches to work and whether they thought men and women approached work and promotion in different ways. Many agreed that it was too much of a generalisation to say that men approached work and progression in a certain way while women did so in another. However some respondents clearly thought that the way academics approach their work has a gendered dimension.

Some respondents felt that men were generally better at protecting their research time and were less likely to spend significant amounts of time devoted to pastoral care and the 'caring side' of teaching and learning. There were also some comments about women generally being more conscientious when it came to teaching and learning and administration and that men were more likely to cut corners in those areas and focus on those activities which would ensure promotion. Some respondents spoke about the importance of pastoral care – and the lack of recognition it received for it.

### Overt Discrimination at the University of Bradford

We heard of few overt and direct cases of discrimination at the institution but we did hear about some. In order to protect the anonymity of our respondents we cannot report the details of the incidents they told us about. However, we were shocked and disappointed to hear of such incidents and even more dismayed to hear that the university, from the respondents' point of view, did little to resolve the matters and support them. We would urge the university to consider carefully how it deals with complaints in relation to discrimination, harassment and bullying. Attention should be paid to what can be done to resolve such matters and support victims. In particular it should consider how it can tackle the perception that the old boys' network will protect its own, or if this is in fact, merely a perception.

### Conclusions and Summary of Policy Recommendations

Our study of progression statistics and university policies showed that there is little wrong with university policy as such. The university has policies that, in theory, should ensure that women academics have an equal opportunity to progress within the university and that they feel valued and supported in their roles. However, the picture of the lived experience of academics that emerged in interviews is somewhat different. Many of our respondents felt that the promotions process was unclear and lacked transparency, that their skills were not valued or rewarded, that it was impossible to carry out their job in a reasonable number of hours, that they had a poor work-life balance, and that the university was still a male-dominated environment. We have made recommendations throughout the main report; their essence can be summarised quite briefly.

- Reward: there is more than one way of being a good academic and this needs to be reflected in the university's system of reward.
- Information: all the information academics need in order to plan and execute career plans needs to be accessible and available at one web location. Misconceptions about what is required need to be tackled.
- Transparency: we have no doubt that the university's promotions systems are more transparent than they were in the past but there is still much to be done. In particular, allocation of non-teaching duties needs to be equitable, and differences between schools must either be eliminated or be capable of proper justification.
- Encourage: a promotion system that relies on self-identification appears to favour confident male applicants at the expense of some women. Alternative or additional ways of identifying candidates for promotion should be identified and trialed.

- Support: the mentoring system is valuable but it does not always perform because of a lack of clarity about its aims and because mentors do not always have the requisite knowledge, skills and experience.
- Visibility: there are women in senior positions in the university but they are not necessarily visible to other women in the institution. A support network is needed to encourage women to aim high, and to develop the skills needed for a move into management roles.
- Balance: it is unclear why academics routinely work very long hours and fail to take annual holidays, but the university needs to explore ways to support a culture of balance. Part of that is recognition of the value of a life outside the university, perhaps by including contribution to the wider community as a category in the promotions criteria.

The full report is available at [www.brad.ac.uk/management/lawinbrief](http://www.brad.ac.uk/management/lawinbrief)