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## Individual or Institutional: Approaches to Gender Balance and Leadership

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**Abstract:** Gender pay and female leadership have surfaced as contemporary topics within higher education institutions across the UK. This paper explores some of the external factors that have been a catalyst for raising awareness and how both institutions and individuals have a responsibility to encourage change. The impact of planned initiatives at a single institution are discussed and evaluated to share good practice and challenge weaknesses.

**Keywords:** Women, Leadership, Gender Balance

### Background

There is an increased scrutiny of gender pay gaps in higher education across the UK. The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) published the existing situation and their recommendations to address the reported issues.

- 13.7% the overall median gender pay gap in HE in 2014/15
- 18.3% the overall mean gender pay gap in HE in 2014/15

Source: ECU (2016) Equality in higher education: staff statistical report

Equal pay is protected by law, however a gender pay gap (GPG) is an indicator that there are fewer women in senior leadership roles at universities and that the balance of women is much higher in low grade and part-time roles. The gap is compared with a national average of 9.1%.

Universities as with other public, private and voluntary sector organisations with 250 employees or more are required to publish their GPG annually.

Other metrics such as vertical and horizontal gender balance may provide a greater understanding of gender issues in HEIs.

In 2018 the CMI published a report on gender inequality “A Blueprint for Balance. Time to fix the broken windows”. The report identified clear practical ways in which individuals, managers and institutions could challenge seemingly small behaviours of gender inequality.

The GPG can also be situated within a national and international increase in a range of gender issues. The pay gap and the lack of women in senior positions within higher education is a long-term issue, however the current political climate and media attention has provided a vehicle for change. In 18/19 only 21% of vice-chancellors and 27% of senior’s managers are women.

Change cannot be restricted to outward actions although these may have some impact. O’Connor (2014) has identified that “Gendered processes effectively limit the available talent”.

The internal culture or ethos of an organisation will restrict or enable processes and interventions. It is suggested that a focus on the

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power balance and underpinning belief systems that have to be addressed for any action or intervention to have a permanent effect (O'Connor 2014).

The impact of culture and accepted leadership behaviours is explored through a number of case studies (Fitzgerald 2014). The author compares how collaborative, relational, caring and nurturing qualities that are often associated with women are criticised in a leadership role but those who adopt male behaviours are also criticised.

## Approach

Higher Education institutions have taken different approaches. For example, The University of Essex gave an immediate uplift for female professors to completely close the pay gap. Almost all HEIs have set out plans to address the GPG across different areas, including recruitment, promotion, development, flexible working. These initiatives include increased unconscious bias training, review of job adverts and mentoring.

Actions can be implemented at different levels for success but all must begin with recognition that if an HEI has an imbalance of men and women in senior leadership roles, or that it has a gender pay gap, then it must be addressed as a priority. The recognition changes a potential action of including both men and women on interview panels as enough through to selecting recruitment companies with a balanced gender profile and insisting on a blind application and an equal mix of shortlisted candidates. Successful organisations also make full use of active staff networks to champion best practice.

Target setting is common practice for universities: student recruitment, retention, attainment and many other measures to identify the 'top' universities for teaching, student experience, green campus and many other league tables. Measuring gender initiatives enables institutions to evaluate their comparative performance and direction of travel.

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of HEI action plans in the short term. The salary uplift as per the example of Essex University can be criticised as addressing an immediate issue but not the underlying cause or putting measures into place that will ensure the gap remains at zero. Neither does this guarantee an equal proportion of male and female professors.

Most English HEIs have a flexible working policy but it is the responsibility of individuals and managers to endorse this through their own practice. How many women are excluded from last minute early morning meetings or feel that they should apologise if caring responsibilities prevent them from attending. At an institutional level flexible working can be promoted as a positive benefit to an organisation and something that both men and women are encouraged to adopt.

The local approach at my own institution was from different angles. These are outlined in the table below.

Initiative	Impact and Evaluation – Year 18/19
Creation of a Gender Pay Working Group	Detailed data evaluation of grade and role
Unconscious bias training	Central delivery to senior team by external consultant Faculty autonomy for local delivery Professional services delivery to managers and other key staff
Staff network Gender Leadership and Development (GLaD)	International Womens' Day celebration introduced Representation at Equality and Diversity Committee
Women only external leadership programme	16 women enrolled Internal activities to support Each woman assigned an internal coach mentor Networking event with senior leadership team Recognition through graduation event Commitment to continued support and resource for 19/20
Stop period poverty	Donation baskets in female restrooms for sanitary products
Increase recruitment of senior female staff	Appoint new consultant company to address diversity One female PVC appointed

Individuals are encouraged to confront gender bias, adopt their own good practice for example supporting flexible working and develop networking skills for leadership development.

## Results

The gender pay gap has not decreased over the past twelve months; however, the institutional actions are long-term. The increased awareness of gender imbalance issues has given confidence to a number of female staffs who feel that they are part of a larger collective

and are empowered to raise their voices. This has included bringing issues of the menopause in the workplace, challenging negative comments and raising the profile of female colleagues.

### **Reflection**

There is a significant amount of work to achieve gender balance, but there is a growing understanding that both the individual and the institution have to drive change. One cannot abstain their responsibility to the other.

There is a reliance on some 'lone voices' to act as role models and their generous example will continue to make a difference.

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