Women, choice and promotion or why women are still a minority in the professoriate

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Women remain a minority in the Australian professoriate despite decades of equal opportunity policy. This article discusses the findings of an intensive case study that investigates why women’s representation declines at the most senior academic levels. Through in-depth interviews with 24 women, the study explores the extent to which women’s choices and aspirations are shaped by academic employment conditions that are ambiguous in their effects on women’s capacity to reach senior academic roles. Responses suggest that women are slowed down, in ways that men often are not, by multiple conditions. The findings draw attention to the need for equity policies that support women to reach the professoriate before retirement becomes the preferred option.

Keywords: choice; gender; higher education; leadership; promotion

Introduction

Australian higher education is commonly described as ‘feminised’ with overall numbers of both female students and staff outnumbering men. At the same time, women remain a minority as senior academics in Australia. The Australian higher education system applies an academic ranking system that begins at Level A (Assistant Lecturer) and rises to Level E (Professor). The transition from Level C (Senior Lecturer) to Level D (Associate Professor) is a particular hurdle that requires the demonstration of academic leadership and excellence at an international standard. Appointment at Level D is rewarded by a substantial increase in status, recognition and pay. In 2010, the national average of female appointments at Level D or above was 27 per cent (Department of Education & Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2011). This is despite the fact that universities have, by and large, complied with Equal Opportunity legislation and have aimed for gender equity in senior academic leadership (Winchester, Chesterman, Lorenzo, & Browning, 2005). This has worked to the extent that the gender balance is approaching equal at Level C yet there is a noted trend that women tend to withdraw from seeking promotion just at the point that they have the qualifications and experience to be eligible for promotion to Level D (Probert, 2005).

This article is based on a detailed case study of one Australian university which is typical of Australian universities in terms of the representation of women at a senior academic level. The study relied on 24 in-depth interviews with women employed ‘below the ceiling’ at Level C. The purpose was to explore why women might be withdrawing from seeking promotion to the professoriate. Specifically, the aim was to investigate the extent

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to which women aspire to promotion and the considerations and conditions that shape the decision-making process.

This article gives an overview of the research on gender equity in higher education and discusses dominant theories of gender inequality in higher education. In particular, I canvass the research that shows that, despite increased participation in academic employment, women remain positioned in ways that are relatively disadvantageous. My research aims to build on that knowledge through exploring how and why women make decisions about promotion and to identify factors that are both encouraging and discouraging of women’s aspirations.

The findings challenge human capital theories that suggest that women’s under-representation of women in leadership is because women choose not to make the investment. Rather, the decision to aspire is made within a set of conditions that shape the feasibility and desirability of pursuing promotion. This article highlights how conditions of academic employment remain powerful in positioning women and men differently and unequally within structures, despite gradual increases in women’s representation in academic leadership.

**Literature and approach**

There are many explanations for why women in academic leadership remain a minority and there is now a large body of literature (for example, Bagilhole & White, 2006; Banerji, 2006; Perna, 2001; Probert, 2005; Thomas, Bierema, & Landau, 2004; White, 2001; White, Carvalho, & Riordan, 2011) that draws attention to multiple systemic barriers that have slowed down women’s progress in academe. A key study is by Burton, Cook, and Wilson (1997), who detailed the problems for equal opportunity in Australian higher education staffing 15 years ago. Drawing on a survey of all Australian universities, this study showed how university employment terms and conditions, policies, practices and reward structures are organised to reward the cluster of characteristics, attributes and background circumstances typical of men (Burton et al., 1997). Each of these conditions has since been explored in greater depth.

There have been a number of studies that explore the ‘leaky pipeline’, the metaphor for how circumstances collude to cause women to leave academic employment at greater rates than men at each key stage of career progression. This process serves to progressively diminish the potential recruitment pool of women for senior academic appointments (Allen & Castleman, 2001; Bell & Bentley, 2006; White, 2001). Others focus on the gendered barriers to establishing and sustaining a research career, an essential criterion for promotion to the professoriate (Bell & Bentley, 2006; Dever, Boreham, Haynes, & Kubler, 2008; Thornton, 2007). Unequal responsibility for care, for families, colleagues and students, is also a major theme in the literature explored as a major reason for women’s slow progression (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Barrett & Barret, 2010; Gerdes, 2006; Probert, 2005). Women’s ambivalence towards and lesser access to professional networks (Benschop, 2009) and a lack of role models and mentors (Burke & Nelson, 2002) to support career progression are also important themes within the literature.

A more recent theme is the gendered effects of waves of higher education reform, the ‘corporatisation’ of Australian universities and the embedding of private sector management principals within university governance (Thornton, 2007; White et al., 2011). This includes a focus on the micro-politics of university life which has shifted from being shaped by principals of collegiality to corporatisation creating new and increasingly harsh organisational cultures of competition (Eveline, 2005). Such cultures and practices,
while appearing to be gender neutral, have gendered effects. Doughney and Vu (2007) for example, highlight the gendered outcomes of professorial appointments made by external recruitment process – a recruitment process increasingly used in the context of internationalisation and is a process that heavily favours the appointment of men. Recent research also explores the gendered effects of academic employment casualisation (Fletcher, Boden, Kent, & Tinson, 2007; Keogh & Garrick, 2005). Others emphasise the power of ‘gender inequality practices’ that operate to cancel out the effect of gender equity strategies and make systemic discrimination invisible (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Overall, this literature shows the structural and systemic processes that generate and reproduce women’s relative disadvantage within academic employment.

An alternative explanation comes from human capital theories that explain women’s under-representation as an outcome of ‘choice’. That is that women choose not to pursue senior academic positions in preference to balancing work and other responsibilities, particularly caring for children and families (Hakim, 2000). This perspective is influential, particularly in the context of the strength of neoliberal paradigms in shaping higher education policy and reform globally and in Australia (Leahy, 2007; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Thornton, 2005). It is also powerful given that there has been a numerical increase in women’s representation in higher education making arguments about there being a ‘glass ceiling’ or rigid structural barriers, difficult to justify. The fact that a minority of women are achieving senior academic leadership positions is taken as evidence that barriers to women have dissolved. The implication, in effect, is that women need to try harder, and the failure to achieve seniority is largely a function of choice. This is a theme that is regularly expressed through broader public discourse and the general media.

The study aimed to build upon existing knowledge with due attention to how women are situated in academic employment relative to men. As the evidence shows, women’s representation is gradually increasing (DEEWR, 2011). Despite this, women are concentrated in a relatively narrow range of disciplines (Stevens-Kalceff, Hagon, Cunningham, & Woo, 2007), they commence academic employment at an older age (Diezmann & Grieshaber, 2010) and at lower salary levels (Probert, 2005). Female academics are more likely to have career interruptions in order to have and care for babies, have primary responsibility for the care of children and other family members and are less likely to have a life partner or, if they do, a life partner that works part-time (Craig, 2005; Probert, 2005). Due to care responsibilities, the type of traditionally female disciplines they are concentrated in and the relatively lower academic ranks at which they are employed, women commonly have greater pastoral care, teaching and administrative responsibilities (Morley, 2006). This reduces the time available to invest in research and other career building activities such as organising conferences (Dever, Morrison, Dalton, & Tayton, 2006). The structural location of women in higher education employment means that, generally, women’s academic career progression is slowed down in ways that men are not.

At the same time, it is necessary to note the gradual increases in women’s representation in leadership positions and the increasing size of the recruitment pool. Women are not ‘squashed ants’ under the weight of a patriarchal structure that conspires to exclude women. Nor is there a rigid glass ceiling to that halts progression. Women exercise considerable agency within the system meaning that gendered structures of academic employment are dynamic. The fact that women remain at a relative disadvantage, however, is a resilient feature of the academic labour market. In this context, this study aimed to explore both women’s aspirations and freedoms, the structural context in which women’s agency is
exercised and how this dynamic is expressed in terms of aspirations for promotion. More simply, I wanted to know why or why not women seek promotion.

Method
This article is based on a case study of women employed at Level C in one Australian University. This is a ‘new’ university that gained university status in 1992 following the Dawkins higher education reforms implemented by the Hawke/Keating government (Dawkins, 1988). The main method was in-depth semi-structured interviews using a common interview schedule of four open-ended questions that explored career histories, current aspirations and beliefs about gender equity in higher education. Individual email invitations to participate were sent to all 58 women employed at Level C at the time and 24 agreed. It was not possible to be definite about why 32 women declined or did not respond although time constraints and heavy workloads were the most common reason given. The interviewees ranged in the age from 38 to 60 years and were employed in almost equal numbers across the three University Faculties that can be broadly described as Business, Arts and Science. The group was also culturally diverse with more than one-third (10 out of 24) of the interviewees born overseas or were the children of migrants from a non-English speaking background. The interviews ranged from 45–120 minutes in length.

The interviews were coded according to a conceptual framework derived broadly from theories of gender from feminist economics (Folbre, 2001) and critical realism (Clegg, 2006; Cruickshank, 2003; Lawson, 2007). A central understanding was that the role of both individual agency and structural conditions are of equal importance. This stems from the broad critical realist position that individuals do not exist or act in a vacuum and are simultaneously the creators and servants of the structures in which they act. The extent to which individuals can exercise choice is dependent on space, time and specific conditions (Cruickshank, 2003). As such, interviews were coded to identify both structural (e.g. promotion processes, organisational conditions and the family type) and individual factors (e.g. expressed preferences, goals and character traits) and whether or not these were considered as generating ‘freedoms’ or ‘constraints’ in relation to seeking promotion. The coded transcripts were analysed using NVIVO (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia) and the narratives of the interviewees were explored with the understanding that decision-making was an outcome of deliberations shaped by often conflicting considerations.

The findings do not inspire optimism that gender equity in the professoriate will be achieved any time soon with only one interviewee having the aspiration of being appointed at Level E confidently in her sights. There was also a large minority (9 out 24) who aspired to reaching Level D although most were cautious about their prospects of achieving this. The majority, however, considered promotion to be highly unlikely, untenable or undesirable for a range of reasons. The following section describes key themes from the interviews in relation to why the interviewees arrived at the decisions they had made.

Why promotion?
The discussions about why women choose to aspire were highly tentative. With few exceptions, the decision-making process was fraught, and one that might not necessarily come to fruition given the weight of disincentives. At the same time, I initially focus on those conditions and factors that are encouraging to promotion which I identify as falling into the broad themes of ‘timing’, ‘absence of care responsibilities’ and ‘support’.
Timing

By timing, I refer to three inter-related conditions that are encouraging to women’s aspirations for promotion. These include: relatively early entrance into academe; early completion of a PhD and employment in emerging disciplines at a time when opportunities were expanding.

As commonly identified, a major barrier to women’s progression in academe is about discontinuous and interrupted career paths that do not conform to the traditional male model of academic career progression (Bergmann, 2005; Folbre & Bittman, 2004; National Tertiary Education Union, 2006; Probert, 2006; Still, 2006; Thanacoody, Bartram, Barker, & Jacobs, 2006; Thompson, Valentine, Hill, & Chan, 2007). This is clearly the case with my interview group and with one exception; none had followed the traditional academic career path of a steady and continuous path along the academic rungs. Most had meandering pathways to academe, and started their careers in fields, such as nursing, where a doctorate had previously not been considered essential. It was also common for women to be channelled early into traditionally female career paths. As one interviewee explained, her early-career choices were extremely narrow, ‘You could be a nurse, a teacher, a secretary, a hairdresser or pregnant at sixteen. I became a teacher.’ This was a common story and what it meant was that most of the interviewees began their career in traditionally female occupations such as nursing, administration or teaching which slowed initial entrance to academe. The major additional hurdle before 1997 is that a PhD was not a requirement for promotion. As such, most had been working as full-time teaching academics while completing their PhD. For many, this period coincided with child-care responsibilities meaning that completing a PhD had been a long and stressful process.

I started my PhD when I was pregnant... I was working full time and it was the full disaster... it took nine years to complete. I think the idea of a PhD is modelled on the old bachelor boy.

Amongst the ten who planned for promotion, there were only two who had the benefit of completing their Doctorate before they were 30 years of age and an additional two that entered the university in their early thirties at a time when there was significant demand for specialised qualifications in emerging fields such as in the health professions. This early start contributed to feeling ready to apply for promotion and inspired the desire for progression.

Relative absence of care responsibilities

Another related characteristic of those who were seeking promotion was the relative absence of care responsibilities. By care, I refer to the time devoted to ensuring that physical and emotional needs of family members are met. I also include the care of self in this category which was a major consideration for at least four of those who are not planning on promotion with the management of health issues that were, in three of those cases, directly related to job stress. Again, the literature identifies unequal responsibility for care as being a major explanation for women’s slow progress in leadership positions generally and academe in particular (Craig, 2006; Leahy, Doughney, & Grace, 2006; Pocock, Skinner, & Williams, 2007; Probert, 2005). The 10 aspirants offer further support for this with most having either no children, a partner who assumed the primary care role or children who had reached adulthood.
Support – mentors, colleagues, cohesive work environments

Support and encouragement either through a mentor, manager or as an outcome of a cohesive work-team environment is an important influence on aspirations. Five of the group talked about these factors as being directly encouraging of their aspirations. For one, it was a remarkable relationship with some critical colleagues, one of whom had subsequently become Dean and another provided PhD supervision. She received coaching, mentoring and academic guidance which she directly attributes to her subsequent progress. Other aspirants similarly identified mentorship as critical:

I did a program called women in leadership and that gave me a mentor. My mentor was fabulous and he really pushed me to go for promotion . . .

For another, a cohesive and supportive departmental environment was a major source of encouragement. She enjoyed a collaborative environment, a supportive Head of School and, while the workload was extreme, there were active efforts to ensure that this workload was shared fairly. Such an environment was not a widely shared experience and its absence was a major disincentive for those who had cancelled out plans for promotion.

Overall, the three clear themes that emerged as being encouraging included good timing in their career progression, the relative absence of care responsibilities and support from mentors, colleagues and/or managers. It is also clear that these influences combine differently according to individual circumstances. One major influence was cultural background. For women from non-English speaking backgrounds, there were particular problems to overcome. The obvious limitation for some was fluency in English language expression. It was also seen to be a disadvantage in knowing how to ‘play the game’ or understand the opaque rules of academic politics. While this was an issue for many of the interviewees, it was particularly the case for those who born overseas. Another issue for one person was that her ethnic background gave her a very youthful appearance and she struggled to be taken seriously by colleagues. For another, the need to translate her early training in a socialist economy to a capitalist context meant that she had to work twice as hard as to keep abreast of developments in her field. For another from a southern European background, cultural expectations that she take the prime responsibility for the care of elders, children and extended family networks were a major constraint.

While cultural differences generated challenges, paradoxically, it was also a motivating force. For one, it was important to earn the title of Associate Professor in order to achieve status in the eyes of her homeland community. For others, their early migration experience was a driving force for the achievement. Another source of advantage was that they were primarily employed in disciplines that were traditionally male dominated, such as engineering, as an outcome of early training in systems that are less segregated by gender than is the case in Australia. These are the fields where there is a high demand for skills and coupled with the implementation of equity agendas that seek to increase women’s representation, there is considerable encouragement for women to progress in these fields. Overall, cultural background emerged as an important influence on career aspirations in ways that were simultaneously a help and a hindrance.

The discussion above has attempted to illustrate the extent to which aspirations for promotion are shaped in the context of a set of often conflicting conditions and considerations. Some of the conditions that are supportive of promotion plans include good timing, support and encouragement and relative freedom from care responsibilities. Cultural background and discipline also operate in ways that can be enabling. Those that do aspire to promotion
generally have the balance of these conditions in their favour. Overall, however, the decision to aim for promotion to Level D was not a clear-cut one for most of the 10 people who aspire. The stories were also not markedly different from those who had arrived at a different decision. The following section discusses this in more detail and identifies the reasons for not aspiring to promotion.

Why not promotion?
Responses by the 14 women who were not intending to apply for promotion were more decisive and there were three main themes relating to this decision. The first was about discouraging or traumatic experiences that have doused any further ambition. This theme connected with negative organisational cultures, experiences of being bullied, or a lack of support. The second major theme was about timing, changes in promotions policy and a belief that they would not be able to meet the criteria. This was a factor that combined with workloads, care responsibilities and/or health management issues. The third but less common reason was about having decided that promotion was not desirable, that they were happy at their current level and/or were unwilling to go through the promotion experience in itself.

Bullying, bad management and hostile cultures
The career aspirations of half of the interviewees were influenced by their experiences of bad or discouraging management practice or hostile work cultures. These experiences varied across departments and campuses and they ranged from stories of relatively ‘benign neglect’ to very serious cases of bullying and/or direct discrimination.

Four of the interviewees talked about having lived through very traumatic experiences that were an outcome of being bullied by senior managers, being the victim of direct discrimination and/or of being ‘frozen out’ of collegial and decision-making networks. Three of this group had suffered some serious and stress-related health issues leading to early retirement plans for two of the three. A common theme was their individual marginalisation as new management structures have been continuously implemented in line with the various waves of national higher education reform. Others talked about a culture of bullying that stemmed from insecurity and constant change. A related issue raised was a lack of any systems to nurture academics along a pathway to promotion, ‘... you just feel your way in the dark’.

Another related discouraging factor was a growing culture of entrepreneurship that contributed to beliefs of not being good enough to expect career progression. For several, previous experiences of seeking promotion were handled in such a way that they were effectively put off ever trying again for varying reasons – one of which was that they believed they were perceived as being not the right ‘fit’ in the new international order. The perception was that it was necessary to be seen as entrepreneurial and international in order to be competitive for a higher position and that a continuous history at the University was as much a disadvantage as it was an advantage.

So I didn’t get that promotion and I was very disenchanted. . . . My gut feeling was that they didn’t want any of the internals, they wanted to get someone in from overseas.

In a related theme, there was a perception that being part of ‘the old guard’ was badly regarded by the management. Half of the interviewees who are not aspiring to promotion
have been with the university for more than 15 years. The view was that the management wanted to erase any organisational memory as a potential barrier to change and restructure. Not only was their contribution to building the foundations of university programmes not valued, that very experience was regarded as an impediment to change.

Overall, a theme expressed by those who are not planning on promotion is that this is because of management that is at best, unsupportive and at worst, actively discriminatory and hostile. Current practices are shaped by continuous reform and directly relate to increasing workloads and changing criteria for promotion. These impact particularly on those with care responsibilities and have led a number of interviewees into a sort of ‘Catch 22’ where they believe that it will be impossible to meet the criteria for promotion.

_Catch 22_

Another theme was about the combined effects of workloads, care responsibilities, PhD requirements and changing criteria for promotion. Two of the interviewees had only recently completed a PhD and believed that it was too late to aim for promotion to Level D. Both were older than 55 years and felt that by the time they had notched up the experience required for promotion, it would be too late and they would be looking at retirement or developing other interests. Three others were caught in the situation that they had not completed a PhD. One person was working on it but had decided that due to workloads and some health management issues, she was not going to ‘kill herself’ in completing a PhD. Another had decided that completing a PhD was impossible in the context of her heavy teaching load, her sole responsibility for two school-aged children and increasing uncertainty within her teaching area due to declining student enrolments. A third, in her late 50s, had resolved to stay at Level C, but work part time and to put her professional energies elsewhere. While the stories varied, each believed that their options were limited by existing workloads, systems and requirements. Meeting the criteria for promotion to Level D was not an option.

... so how can I bring up my research points? The head of school just allocates more and more teaching and you can never get out of that cycle. With my teaching, and with my family situation, if I work on a PhD, I work seven days. I don’t see any way.

_Perceptions of leadership_

The third theme was about perceptions of leadership and the application of a kind of ‘cost-benefit’ analysis about the realities of promotion to a higher level. Two of the interviewees were particularly clear that promotion would prevent them from doing what it is that they most enjoy about their work which is to pursue their own academic interests within their given fields. Progression to Level D was unrelated to the reasons for entering academe in the first instance. Perception of an onerous administrative workload was the main deterrent. A similar analysis had been applied by a third interviewee, but in her case it was more to do with needing to ‘feel ready’.

The three themes discussed above attempt to encapsulate the major factors that deter aspirations. The first theme is about unsupportive management, hostile work cultures and university reforms that have exclusionary effects. The second relates to how individual constraints including age and care responsibilities combine to make it impossible, in some instances, to meet changing criteria for promotion. The third is about negative perceptions of the requirements of leadership positions.
Making choices about promotion

The findings from the interviews show that the majority of the women involved in this case study have chosen to withdraw from seeking promotion to Level D for multiple and varied reasons. However, this decision-making is not an unfettered expression of individual preference. Rather, it is an outcome of deliberation undertaken in the light of a complex set of conditions. Furthermore, and contrary to what human capital theories would suggest, it shows how women at Level C are highly invested in their careers in order to have been appointed at Level C in the first instance. This requires, at best, a good 10 years of study and experience and longer if there are other distractions such as having children. Despite this investment, whether or not women aspire to the next level is commonly tenuous.

Factors that encourage promotion aspirations are related to personal, disciplinary and organisational conditions and those that were the most enthused about seeking promotion had the sustained weight of conditions in their favour. A major factor was becoming eligible to seek promotion at a relatively early-career stage. This meant starting early on a particular disciplinary path, in a field with expanding career opportunities, completing a PhD and accumulating teaching experience and a research track record in a tenured academic position before retirement was to be a realistic option. Another factor was having had the benefit of a trusted mentor or critical colleague to help negotiate the ever-changing academic ‘game’ and support in the development of influential professional networks. Working in a collegiate organisational unit also helped to survive an ever-increasing administration, research and teaching load. A key factor was relative freedom from, or support with, care responsibilities and that their immediate family remained well over the course of their careers. One critical blow to career aspirations was the illness of a child, spouse or parent that just could not be managed alongside a more senior academic role.

Meeting the criteria for promotion to Level D requires single-minded and uninterrupted focus over an extended period. It remains the case that the chance of sustaining the right conditions to build an academic career over the 15 or more years, it takes to reach Level D is weighed in men’s favour. This study shows the important influence of conditions that particularly affect women. To name three, unequal responsibility for child/family care, interrupted careers to have children and concentration in a narrow range of less prestigious and well-resourced disciplines operate to limit the possibilities for promotion. These things have a combined impact on the capacity to maintain a research and publication record, develop supportive networks and manage the harsher impacts of continuous higher education reform.

The study also shows that academic women do exercise considerable agency and the tenuous nature of their decision-making shows that if certain conditions were to change (for example, gaining further support and encouragement after a failed attempt at promotion), aspirations might change. Each woman negotiates structural conditions in accordance with her own capacity and circumstances highlighting the need for equity policy and programmes to have dual focus on the individual and structural circumstances affecting women.

In conclusion, the study shows the varied freedoms, opportunities and circumstances impacting on women’s career aspirations. It also shows the extent to which women generally are positioned in academe in ways that men often are not. Both individual and structural circumstances shape the possibility of whether or not seeking promotion is feasible or desirable. For many women in academe, by the time they are qualified and experienced enough to be eligible for promotion, there is no choice. If gender equity in the professoriate
is the goal, direct and finely tuned affirmative action measures are needed. In particular, women need support to become eligible to apply for promotion before they reach retirement age.

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