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# Women as Leaders of Higher Education Institutions: A British-German Comparison

By Barbara Read and Barbara M. Kehm (University of Glasgow)

*Corresponding author:*

Dr Barbara Read

Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change, University of Glasgow, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, UK. Tel: +44-(0)7539 304942. Email: barbara.read@glasgow.ac.uk.

*Author:*

Professor Barbara M. Kehm

Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change, University of Glasgow, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, UK. Tel: +44-141-330 3470. Email: barbara.kehm@glasgow.ac.uk.

*Abstract:*

Across the vast majority of countries women are a significant minority in senior academic positions, and as of 2013 only 17% of Vice Chancellors of UK universities and 12% of German Universities were women. This paper discusses findings from a study consisting of interviews with eight female Vice Chancellors of British and German higher education institutions. The paper takes a feminist poststructuralist approach to look at the ways in which characteristics of 'ideal' leaders in academia are discursively produced in a myriad of gendered ways, and looks at the influence of dominant academic cultures, status of institutions, and national policy landscapes. From an analysis of the findings we argue that as well as increasing the numerical proportion of women leaders in academia, work also crucially needs to be done to challenge academic cultural practices and dominant gendered conceptualisations of the 'leader'. (141 words)

**Women as Leaders of Higher Education Institutions: A British-German Comparison**

In recent years, a rise in the total number of women undergraduates has led to the argument that Higher Education has become a 'feminized' arena, with headlines such as 'Women Surge, Men Sink in Education's Gender Gap' in Canada's Globe and Mail (Church, 2009) and the UK's Daily Mail describing men as a 'disadvantaged group' on campus (Clark, 2014). However, as feminist critics have pointed out, the representation and success of women students is by no means universal across disciplines, universities and countries and the picture is further complicated by the representation of women amongst senior academic staff. At professorial level in the UK there were only 16% women in 2009 (Women in Science Database, cited in White et al., 2012) and just over 20% in Germany at the end of 2012 (Destatis, 2013). Once we look at the picture for governing boards, Vice Chancellors and Principals the argument for the 'feminised academy' seems very weak. The 2013 Women Counts Report states that men outnumber women by two-thirds to one-third on governing bodies and councils in the UK and only 12% of chairs for these bodies are women (Jarboe, 2013). Similarly as of 2013 only 17% of Vice Chancellors of UK universities were women (although a few recent appointments including the notable appointment of Professor Louise Richardson at Oxford will bring this figure closer to 20% in 2015). German figures are 14% female Vice Chancellors at universities and 11% at universities of applied sciences, an average of 12% across the sector (Statistical Department of the German Rectors' Conference, personal communication).

We will present and analyse data from a qualitative study with eight female Vice Chancellors of British and German higher education institutions. Before doing so we will first outline some key issues in the research literature in this area.

**State of Research: Gender and Academic Leadership**

Leadership programmes in academia and elsewhere often focus on developing and enhancing characteristics such as assertiveness, confidence, detachment and risk-taking in potential leadership candidates. However, such 'ways of doing' leadership may arguably be harder for some women to feel comfortable performing, due to their cultural ascription as 'masculine' characteristics (Morley, 2013, 2014; Burkinshaw, 2015). Whilst valuable, such a focus can implicitly or explicitly assume 'blanket' gender differences between men and women (for example that women 'prefer' transformative rather than transactional leadership styles, and/or that women are more able to perform 'soft skills' such as empathy and conversational skills). At times this conception of women and men as homogenous groups can lead to an essentialising of gender, as if men and women 'naturally' have different styles of leadership and professional performance (White et al., 2012).

In contrast, as feminist researchers such as Acker (2012) point out, there has been a shift towards a postmodernist or more specifically, poststructuralist turn in analysis of gender in relation to conceptions and experiences of academic work. From such a perspective the category of gender itself as tied to 'fixed' sexed bodies is problematized, and a more fluid

approach to the analysis of gender as 'performance' has become prominent in the literature (see e.g. Eveline, 2005; Maguire, 2008). Such an approach looks at the ways in which characteristics of 'ideal' leaders in academia are discursively produced in many gendered (and 'raced' and classed) ways. For example, a leader does have a degree of agency in terms of deciding on aspects such as their appearance and preferred leadership styles of practice. However such decisions are constrained by culturally dominant discourses of what is appropriate and acceptable. As we shall see from our study, knowing the unwritten 'rules of the game' in terms of gender appropriate and acceptable dress for leaders is part of the knowledge explicitly handed down to other women in mentoring relationships, and then become self-regulatory practices (see Shah, 2015, for a discussion of self-regulatory practices amongst Vice Chancellors in Pakistani universities).

The 'other-ness' of the woman leader is highlighted by the greater difficulty women have in 'passing' as a leader – gaining legitimacy from their colleagues in the academy. As we have noted, many discursively constructed conceptions of 'appropriate' leadership performance are culturally ascribed as masculine. As well as making them arguably less comfortable for some women to adopt, it seems that others can also feel less comfortable viewing such behaviours and practices on the part of women leaders, which can sometimes be seen to jar with additional expectations of appropriately 'feminine' dress and behaviour (see Walkerdine, 1990; Walker, 1998). This can lead to more negatively perceived judgements towards women when they exhibit masculinised characteristics - for example assertiveness in leadership has been shown to be viewed more positively when coming from male colleagues than from female colleagues (Ridgeway, 2001). Similarly, culturally perceived 'feminised' behaviours and practices such as social skills– or even dress – can lead to negative judgements as to the seriousness and gravitas of a woman for a leadership role. Difficulties can be even more keenly felt if other aspects of a leader's identity are also culturally perceived as 'other'. For example, Leathwood (2005) found that black lecturers felt their legitimacy was especially questioned by both staff and students.

The social dominance of the masculine (like 'whiteness') is discursively legitimised to such a degree that it seems 'natural' or inevitable, to the extent that it cannot be perceived as dominance as such but as a neutral 'natural' order of things. Any challenge to this normalised social order is then perceived to be of much greater effect than is actually the case. Such dismorphic interpretations of an organisational body arguably lie behind expressed fears or anger that women leaders will transform established institutional cultures in ways that will directly be to the detriment of men, including the favouring of other women. For example, Fisher's (2007) ethnography of a Business School in the UK relates that the appointment of a female Dean engendered complaints that "you need tits to get on around here" – despite the overall dominance of men staff in the department and the expressed perception by women participants in the study that this Dean was not especially supportive of women's issues.

Just as the conception of leadership itself is culturally gendered, so is the conception of the university academic. Historically higher education, where it existed across the globe, was the province of the elites of society - and the province of men. Today, despite sizeable numerical changes in the student body and amongst more junior staff, the cultures of institutions can still

be seen to reflect the dominant construction of the academic as male, middle- or upper-class, and in many cases white (see e.g. Alfred, 2001; Stanley, 2006, Leathwood and Read, 2009; David, 2014).

The 'marketization' of the sector in recent decades and the rise of new managerialist cultures in Higher Education institutions have markedly changed the landscape of academia, providing a significant challenge to traditional cultures of academic 'freedom' and 'collegiality'. Whilst many critics of new managerialism have pointed to the iniquitous effects of the stress and pressures resulting from such changes to academic staff (see e.g. Acker and Armenti, 2004; Leathwood and Read, 2013), some have argued that aspects of new managerialist culture may have benefits for women in academia (see Luke, 2001). In particular the increased emphasis on aspects of 'transparency' and 'accountability' have been argued by some to challenge judgements and practices (such as the ear-marking of people for promotion) that would often favour men. Explicit, transparent appointment and promotion criteria can help to counteract the influence of 'old boys' networks', and provide at least a starting point to examine and work to challenge the forms of experience and practices, behaviours and styles of 'doing' the academic role that are preferred by appointing and promotion committees.

The rise of new managerialist practices has been linked to a de-professionalisation of the profession and a subsequent loss of status of the position of the academic (Randle and Brady, 1997). As with other sectors, it is no coincidence that the academy is increasingly being described as 'feminised' at the same time as it is seemingly losing status and prestige. One notable link between gender and status is at institutional level. In a recent article on women leaders in Swedish Higher Education, Peterson notes that although there has been some research on variations in experience in relation to discipline, less attention has been paid to the relationship between gender and institutional status (Peterson, 2015; although see e.g. Blackmore and Sachs, 2000). She utilises the concept of the 'academic prestige economy' to discuss how a multiplicity of status differentials and hierarchies within academia work to maintain and perpetuate difference. University league tables are one such measurement that work to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities in terms of status and prestige. Whilst Peterson notes the different cultural status of universities and university colleges in Sweden, a similar distinction is often made in Germany between universities and universities of applied sciences and in the UK between 'pre-1992' and 'post-1992' universities, and between the 'elite' Russell Group of universities and the rest of the sector (for a fuller description of the UK and German HE systems see below). As we shall discuss, such status differentials are complexly linked to gender in the UK but less so in Germany – suggesting intriguing national differences which we will attempt to explore in the rest of the paper.


**Contextual Information and Methodological Approach**

The German system of higher education predominantly consists of universities (108) and universities of applied sciences (216), as well as additional colleges of higher education and private sector instititions.  Research is also conducted at prestigious extra-university research

institutes (e.g. Max-Planck Institutes, Fraunhofer Institutes) as well as within industry. The main difference between universities and universities of applied sciences is that the latter are mainly teaching institutions offering more professionally oriented study programmes (mainly at undergraduate level) and do not have the right to award doctoral degrees. Universities of applied sciences are generally smaller than universities in terms of staff and student numbers and also have a smaller spectrum of subjects that students can study (mainly economics/business administration, social work and engineering). Finally, universities of applied sciences are younger than many (though not all) universities. They were established as an alternative to universities in the phase of higher education expansion in the early 1970s (in West Germany) and after 1990 in East Germany. It is important to keep in mind that the federal states are responsible for all higher education institutions located on their territory. The states provide the legal framework and are also the main funding body.

Vice Chancellors in Germany are either called Rectors (i.e. elected from within) or Presidents (i.e. outside candidates can apply). Until the establishment of Boards of Governors Rectors and Presidents were elected by the academic Senate and appointed by the Minister for Higher Education of the respective State. Nowadays Boards have more control of the process but still need to seek agreement from the Senate for a proposed candidate. Once a candidate has been found and agreed upon the Boards will go into contract and salary negotiations. Altogether there are 39 female Rectors and Presidents at German higher education institutions, 16 (14%) of them are university leaders and 23 (11%) are leaders of universities of applied sciences. Another interesting feature is that among the universities led by a woman 14 are located in West German states and only two in East German states. Concerning female-led universities of applied sciences the picture is similar: five out of 23 female-led institutions are located in East-Germany, the other 18 in West-Germany. For the sake of better understanding the term vice chancellor (VC) is used here for both British vice chancellors as well as German rectors and presidents.

Overall there are 166 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 conveyed university status (and therefore the right to award their own degrees) on a swathe of higher education institutions in the UK that were formerly polytechnics (historically institutions with a more 'technical', applied or professional practice orientation). Therefore in principle the UK higher education system is predominantly a unitary system of university institutions, with exceptions including the 'in practice' autonomy of many Colleges in the University of London, and a range of HE Colleges and FE Colleges offering HE- level education that do not have university status and degree-awarding powers. Most UK Higher Education Institutions are informally categorised according to whether they were universities before or after the 1992 act – and are commonly referred to as 'pre-92' or post-92 institutions. There are other groupings in place, in particular, the 24 institutions of the 'Russell Group' of universities that are considered to be those of highest status in the UK.

The Heads of Universities in the UK are generally called Vice Chancellors (VCs) (and sometimes Principal or President with Vice Chancellor as an honorific title). Technically the VC is deputy to the Chancellor, although in practice Chancellors are ceremonial figureheads. The Heads of the Colleges of the University of London that are in effect separate universities

are generally given the title Principal (or Rector in the case of Imperial College). Most Vice Chancellors report regularly to governing boards or councils, whose membership varies by institution but who generally consist of a mixture of academic figures and local business, public or third sector leaders. As of 2013 83% of vice-chancellors were men and 17% women.

For this paper we have drawn on data from telephone/skype interviews with eight women Vice Chancellors, four based in the UK and four in Germany, which were carried out in November and December 2015. The study is small-scale and exploratory in design, and therefore the findings are tentative and are intended to highlight potential fruitful avenues for further research. We aimed for a range of institutional types by choosing VCs of two universities and two universities of applied sciences in Germany, and two pre-92 and two post-92 universities in the UK. Interviews were carried out on the basis of a semi-structured interview guideline and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes each. Interviews were taped and transcribed and all personal as well as institutional information was anonymised. In this paper we have used the indicators G for VCs based in Germany and UK for those based in the United Kingdom. For the German interviews we have further indicated the participant (as A, B, C, and D) and type of institution (where U stands for university and FH for *Fachhochschule*, the German term for a university of applied sciences). We have not given further details for the UK data due to a request by one of the participants who felt it could make participants identifiable, given the very small pool of candidates especially in the pre-92 sector. Interpretation of the information gathered by way of interviewing was carried out on the basis of a thematic analysis which involved the identification and categorization of themes emerging from the data, which are presented below.

## Presentation of Results: Gender and Leadership in Higher Education

### *Becoming a Leader*

Except for one German VC all our interview participants were external candidates for the position of VC at their current institutions. Most had previous experiences as deans, heads of schools and/or deputy VCs. The German VCs were typically approached by a member of the Board of Governors or the search committee of the institution looking for a new VC, while the two VCs from British pre-92 universities were approached by 'headhunter' recruitment organizations. It is also interesting to note that several of our interview partners said that the respective university was explicitly looking for somebody who would bring change.

Our participants were quite unanimous in stating that having had a professorship before becoming a VC is a necessary although insufficient condition. 'To have a professorship is extremely important but those who are interested in the job of a VC need more than just the academic experience of professors' (G-D (U)). One participant pointed out that although universities can be and perhaps must be business-like they are also communities of scholars: 'The idea that someone who's run a large company can just come in and slash and burn – I'm sorry that just does not work' (UK).

Several of our participants noted that the job descriptions for the position of a VC were quite broad or generic and either had a 'hidden agenda' (G-A (FH)), or 'typically understated … the daily business of administration' (G-D (U)), or – as another VC formulated it – 'the social competences necessary are rather written down in the small print' (G-C (U)). )). A British VC mentioned the importance to mentor women, especially in the 'unwritten rules of the game' (UK).

*Styles of Leadership*

Most of our participants mentioned three characteristics when asked to describe their own style of leadership: collegial, consultative and 'taking people with them' – identified in the literature as culturally ascribed 'feminine' characteristics (although as one participant noted, in interview '*everybody* says [they are] collegial'. Some participants argued however that a collegial leadership style does not and should not imply that they are 'going to be walked over' and therefore, 'developing those boundaries is probably something that females have to do more keenly than males' (UK). Interestingly VCs from both German and British institutions tended to describe their own leadership styles in contrast to that of their (male) predecessors, for example: 'My predecessor was hierarchical, conservative, risk averse and also had a more representative understanding of his office' (G-D (U)). A British VC who described her leadership style as 'consultative' added 'and that is in contrast to my predecessor' (UK).

Other common features of participants' stated leadership style are openness and transparency as well as striving to be a team player, and building good relationships with colleagues. Several of the British VCs mentioned that they changed the rules for promotion processes to become more transparent and gender balanced. Many participants had quite a clear understanding of how to shape things but they did not want to do it alone. They can also be directive without turning to bullying: 'I want to achieve a good balance of bottom-up and top-down leadership' (G-D (U)). Interestingly a British VC pointed out that whilst a bullying style of leadership is no longer ostensibly acceptable, people in higher education, especially the older generation 'accept much more aggressive behaviour from the men than they do from women'. She concluded: 'So you've got to alter your style. Perhaps women have found it easier to deal with the unacceptability of a bullying style of leadership' (UK). Another British VC described her style as 'being pretty robust but also sympathetic, open, transparent, consultative' (UK).

Some VCs described being protective in terms of not putting others in the line of fire. Referring to threats received via social media, one British VC stated: 'I don't want to open others up to being more visible and possibly targeted for criticism. That's something I still wrestle with to be honest' (UK).

Some of our participants mentioned that they had to assert themselves as leaders in the beginning: 'After my first election I noticed rather quickly that I literally had to pee into every corner. Thus I made a conscious decision to throw out all the furniture in my predecessor's office and had a new logo designed for the institution' (G-B (FH)). These were not just

activities to 'mark her new territory' but 'symbolic actions to indicate change' (G-B (FH)). There is an echo of that in one of the interviews with a British VC who stated: 'I really feel there's a genuine issue that people don't like taking directions if you like or instruction from women' (UK).

Most participants also stated that over time their leadership style had changed somewhat based on their experiences at the beginning of their first term of office. One German VC mentioned that she had been rather direct in her interactions at the beginning but is 'now more careful not to hurt people' (G-A (FH)). Another one had to learn to become more patient: 'At the beginning I thought things could happen faster but then I realised that some things need time' (G-B (FH)). Others have consciously attempted to change the cultural perception of leadership within their institution, for example, by creating a stronger awareness for gender and diversity issues (G-D (U)) or to produce all statistics according to gender (G-A (FH)).

*Policy Context*

As stated previously higher education leadership in Germany is strongly influenced by state policies and because German higher education institutions still receive about 80 percent of their budget from the state the responsible Ministry can exert a certain amount of direct pressure. This is reflected in the statements of one German VC who said that the policy context has not so much influenced her personal leadership style but has considerably influenced the management of the institution. Generally German higher education institutions are increasingly supposed to support state policies – as is the case in the UK by the way, but here it is a mixture of regional (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and national policies. However, British institutions seem to be considerably more autonomous in terms of direct national policy influence than German ones. German higher education institutions typically have to sign goal agreements with the responsible Ministry of the State and also can be pressurised into achieving these goals. Each State typically formulates a medium-term higher education development plan for all institutions located on its territory in order to avoid overlap and more strongly streamline available offers.

A German VC clearly stated that 'changes in policy have led to a stronger professionalization of higher education management and leadership and to a more targeted strategy development' (G-B (FH)). Another German VC emphasised that it is 'extremely important to have a good working relationship with the Ministry' (G-D (U)) even if there is not always agreement. This also entails the need to convince the deans to support and implement decisions possibly taken elsewhere, i.e. where the university did not have much choice.

A British VC stated that policy influence prevented the achievement of some of the goals that had been formulated for her institution, e.g. a broader outreach in terms of international students was prevented by stricter visa policies, but if there are 'constraints you just have to get there by a different route' (UK). She also emphasised the importance of being open and transparent about such constraints inside the institution without openly criticising the government because that could lead to a negative response on the internet and in social media.

'Frankly as a woman leader of a higher education institution you're visible by definition. So you've got to be extra cautious' (UK).

It seems that the policy context in the two countries being compared here creates different forms of constraints. In Germany the policy context was mentioned much more frequently by the VCs than in the UK. This seems to be related to the fact that some German state governments still have a tendency to micro-manage their institutions. British higher education institutions have a more flexible legal status but the influence of policy issues can be seen more strongly in the use of metrics and competition which impact on reputation. In both countries gendered constraints on agency in leadership were highly apparent – whilst needing to be assertive in attempting to shape agendas, issues such as the need to be 'cautious' due to their heightened visibility in the role, and a conception that people may negatively interpret their skills and experience to implement change were apparent.

### *Gender and Higher Education Culture(s)*

Despite the fact that most universities now have a majority of women undergraduate students and that among the younger researchers the proportion of women has also visibly increased, our participants were unanimous in saying that this is not sufficient to 'feminise' the culture of a higher education institution. The 'old boys' networks' were seen to be still clearly in place – though some of our participants stated that they are no longer dominant. The German VCs all emphasised that in order to change the gendered culture a critical mass of women among the professors is needed (critical mass meaning a proportion of 30 to 35 percent). In order to achieve this, the German VCs tended to use one of the most important steering instruments in German higher education which is to promote women into senior academic positions by making sure that as many open positions as possible are filled by women. But as one VC put it 'change is slow' (G-B (FH)). Another participant was more optimistic when stating that the situation 'will improve in the next generation. Female professors nowadays are quite confident in managing job, career and family' (G-D (U)).

Interestingly we can see here a mix of discourses concerning gender and change in the academy – a conviction that obtaining a numerical increase in women leaders will challenge the culture of the academy. But there is also a sense that women can 'hold themselves back' through lack of confidence in taking on a leadership role. The British VCs tended to emphasise the importance of making sure that appointment processes and (internal) promotion systems are open and transparent. In addition they also mentioned 'tapping women on the shoulder and telling them 'go for it'' (UK). Another VC stated that 'our biggest problem is getting women to come forward' (UK). A third VC stated that 'the key gender difference is that women do not automatically put themselves forward for senior positions to the same degree as men' (UK) which is echoed by the remark of a German VC who said about herself 'I am not much of a drummer' (G-A (FH)) when she was asked to stand up for the position of VC for the first time in her life and chose not to.

Challenging the culture of the academy is thus mainly spoken of in relation to developing practices that could increase the numerical proportion of women leaders. Due to the

differences in higher education cultures in Germany and the United Kingdom (e.g. German higher education does not have an internal promotion system) British VCs described using somewhat different instruments in order to do this. Apart from using appointment and promotion processes to get more women into senior positions, one VC changed the structural set-up of her university by dividing old-style large faculties into a larger number of institutes in order to create more leadership opportunities for women. All of the British VCs pointed out that more leadership development programmes are needed to prepare women for such positions and some are active in the Aurora Programme and other leadership initiatives for women, or otherwise become involved in raising awareness and promoting women for leadership positions. Moreover, the importance of mentoring programmes and more informal peer networks was mentioned frequently by VCs from both countries.

In terms of challenging the status quo, the participants did not tend to explicitly describe challenging existing gendered 'cultures' in the academy (for example the high values placed on behaviours, communication styles and practices that are seen to demonstrate assertiveness, confidence, emotional 'detachment' and risk). However, as we have discussed above, the VCs tended to describe their own consultative, 'collegial' leadership styles in ways that are arguably culturally ascribed as 'feminine' – sometimes in contrast to more 'masculinised' styles of their predecessors. A number of the British VCs explicitly discussed however the difficulties of challenging the ways in which leadership is 'enacted' in the academy in terms of style and image. Three of the British VCs strongly emphasised the need 'to look like a leader': 'I always felt that I had 'to dress the part'. They expect you to be well-dressed, neatly turned out … smart, very presentable, not dishevelled, crumpled clothes' (UK). Another VC stated that 'I do think sometimes with women … this is very politically incorrect but I want to say to them please go and get a haircut and wear better clothes. Just because they don't seem to look the role' (UK).

This physical 'smartness' presumably is valued in order to demonstrate the mental 'smartness' of being in control of one's self as well as others – however as discussed above the discursively constructed body of a leader is a masculine one. The same participant goes on to say that there are 'certain parts of the male population where you definitely have to work that bit harder to make people kind of accept you as their leader' (UK). Challenging such constructions is hard. One VC ignored advice from a leadership programme not to wear make-up, and 'just sort of adopted a uniform that works for me' but also emphasised that 'you can never win, you're under a level of scrutiny that men are not under, and that's quite hard' (UK).

It is interesting to note that the issue of 'looking the part' did not come up in the interviews with German VCs. However, German VCs also mentioned that it tends to be harder for women than for men to become accepted as the leader of an institution and that they had developed various strategies at the beginning of their first term of office to overcome this lack of acceptance (also see section 'styles of leadership').

*Higher Education Culture(s) and Institutional Differences*

The majority of our participants agreed that it is easier to change culture and practices – at least in terms of appointing women leaders – at smaller and younger institutions. 'The post-92 sector is a bit more accepting of diversity in about every way … The pre-92 universities are a lot more of the old boys' club' (UK). And another British VC observed that 'male leaders are [seen to be] the leaders of 'proper' institutions. The women leaders are the leaders of 'arty' colleges or 'polys' [i.e. former polytechnics] … so the binary gets perpetuated' (UK). The VC of a long-established, large German university confirmed this by stating that 'the traditional universities are generally more conservative due to the chair system which the younger ones don't have any longer' (G-D (U)). However, one German VC of a small and more recently established university of applied sciences (FH) did not agree. She argued that 'at large institutions there is room for experiments with parts of the institution' while she herself had more difficulty as she 'always had to deal with the institution as a whole' (G-A (FH)).

Basically there were two main arguments concerning the underlying reasons leading to the election or appointment of women VCs: an institution with problems that needs change and the presence of 'enlightened Boards'.

The first reason came up in particular among German VCs. The existence of women leaders was seen to be 'not related to the age or size of the institution but rather to the question whether an institution has problems and possibly a low or problematic profile. Then the trend is to elect a female VC' (G-A (FH)). Another VC said that 'the election of female VCs sometimes seems to be the result of a vote of protest against a male predecessor. Women get elected when changes are to happen and the institution needs a "fresh breeze"' (G-B (FH)). Thus the election or appointment of female VCs tends to be linked to the belief that women will lead differently just by virtue of being a woman. A female VC from an old and established German university compared the election of women VCs to 'cleaning up': 'Women have better chances to become a VC when there is a feeling among the majority of people that 'cleaning up' is needed' (G-C (U)) This is an interesting reference to a traditionally 'feminine' (and not highly culturally valued) duty in relation to house cleaning, transposed to the cleaning and 'airing' of an institution.

The second reason came up among British as well as German women VCs. One German university VC said that the German states have paid more attention to having more women in the Boards and this has led to Boards paying more attention to the possibility of recruiting a female VC, 'although the picture is still mixed' (G-C (U)). This echoes the statement of a British VC from a post-1992 institution: 'There are various levels of enlightenment of Boards in terms of how to deal with females in senior positions' (UK). Another British VC told us that she is a member of an organization called the '30% Club' which aims to get 30 percent of women on Boards of a range of institutions, with the Club currently turning its attention to the higher education sector (UK). Finally, a German university VC pointed out that 'if there is a good Board women will have more opportunities but the 'big tankers' tend to go for men' (G-D (U)).

In summarising the mixed picture still seems to be the rule but participants believed there to be better opportunities for women to become VCs when Boards have a critical mass of female

members. They also indicated that it is easier for women to become a VC at institutions having problems and needing change and that change is harder to bring about at traditional and top research universities. But while a British university VC was more pessimistic about having more women VCs in the near future, a German university VC was considerably more optimistic predicting change in this respect within the next generation.


**Discussion and Conclusion**

In this final section we want to make a number of observations that stood out in the analysis.

First, there seemed to be a pattern that women become elected or appointed as VCs when there are problems and change is needed and wanted. Interestingly some of our participants described this in terms of the duties of the traditional 'housewife', namely as 'cleaning up' and 'straightening out' – although as mentioned, this is a culturally less valued conception in contrast to the more highly valued qualities of 'charismatic' masculinised leadership – one who leads through 'force of personality', and implies an essentialised connection between women and the organisation and care of the (institutional) household. Some discussed the seemingly metronomic whims of Boards who want to try 'something different' when appointing a new VC, including the conception that a change in gender of the VC may by itself incur change. One VC explicitly mentioned that she is monitoring this situation to see if such boards revert back to choosing a male candidate when the current incumbent leaves her position.

Our participants talked explicitly about the need to legitimise themselves in the role of leader and many talked about the legitimising status of a professorship - a necessary but insufficient condition for the position of a VC. Our participants emphasised the importance of leadership experience, knowledge of administrative processes and social competences in dealing with people. The need for further professionalization was mentioned frequently.

In terms of the influence of policy context, this tended to be felt in Germany through the direct influence the state ministries have on their higher education institutions. However, the impact was seen to be stronger on management than it is on leadership. But VCs in the UK also tend to see government policies as restrictive or constraining and are highly aware of the potentially negative impacts and even dangers of social media: an issue which did not come up in the interviews with German VCs and would be a fruitful and important area for further research. So while in Germany the influence of state ministries is a constraint created by the policy context, it is competition, reputation and anticipated negative impacts of social media in the UK.

The VCs in our study tended to describe their own leadership style as collegial, consultative and making clear efforts to 'take people with' them – styles of leadership culturally constructed as 'feminised' in comparison to styles culturally constructed as 'masculinised' such as 'top down' direct authority. However our participants also emphasised the need to be assertive and directive if necessary – as noted in the literature this can be a difficult balancing

act when assertiveness in women leaders is interpreted by others more negatively than if it was enacted by men. In this context some VCs mentioned the importance of showing clear boundaries to demonstrate that although they are collegial they still hold authority.

All women stated that in a multiplicity of ways it is harder for women than it is for men to get accepted as leaders, and some discussed the ways in which their presented image and behaviour was constrained by a need to be mindful of the ways in which their extra visibility as women leaders led them to be scrutinised at a higher level than men, and the different ways in which their behaviour and practices might be interpreted because they were women rather than men. As such, no participant implied an essentialised relation between gender and leadership style but instead talked about common constraints women leaders may come up against due to the interpretation of their practices as 'other' to the discursively constructed norm of the embodied male leader.

A common agreement was that critical mass is needed among professors and VCs (potentially also in the composition of Boards) in order to change the gendered culture at higher education institutions. In order to do this a number of participants had prioritised open and transparent appointment/promotion procedures, and the mentoring and encouragement of women to apply for promotion. One participant discussed the need for 'enlightened' governing boards which implies a change of ethos and culture that is not guaranteed by a mere numerical increase in women in positions of power. The difficulties of challenging existing cultures was highlighted by the common agreement that it was easier to make changes at 'younger' institutions who are described as less tied to existing traditions. However it is not just the 'weight of tradition' that leads to a pattern (in the UK at least) of women leaders being appointed more commonly to the 'newer' academic institutions – it is also the accompanying cultural status and prestige of institutions. Supporting research by Peterson (2015) and others, we found that the 'prestige economy' in higher education is highly gendered, with a tendency for women leaders to be an 'acceptable fit' more often in institutions which were not perceived to have an 'elite' status – although as we have seen this does not mean that leaders in these institutions do not have many similar challenges to their counterparts in the more 'elite' institutions related to gender. As some of our participants discussed, the cultural connection between legitimate 'leadership' and masculinity is pervasive amongst many occupational sectors and throughout wider cultures in many countries across the globe.

Increasing the numbers of women in senior positions in academia is a crucially important step in changing perceptions of leadership, but by itself a change in numerical composition does not mean a change in culture. More needs to be done in order to challenge what are valued styles, behaviours, policies and practices in the academy more broadly, in order to a facilitate a cultural climate whereby a woman taking on the leadership of a university does not by itself constitute the grounds for surprised newspaper headlines.

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