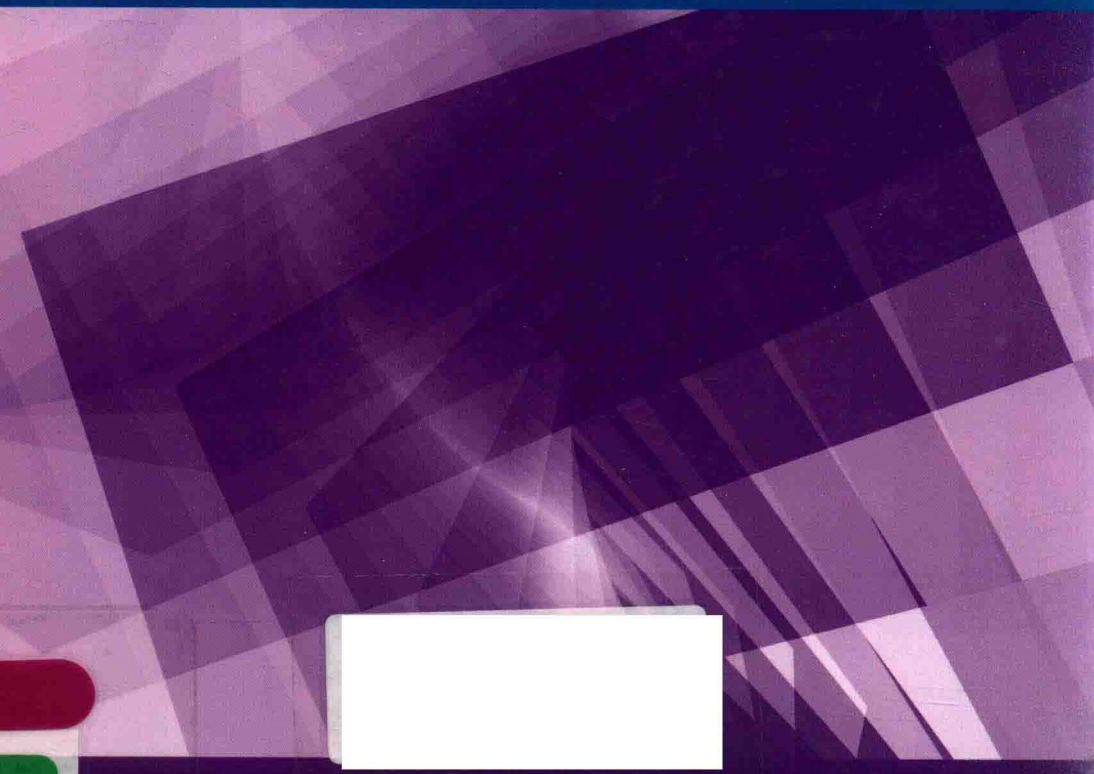
IRISH SOCIETY

MANAGEMENT AND GENDER IN HIGHER EDUCATION



Pat O'Connor

MANAGEMENT AND GENDER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Pat O'Connor

MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS
Manchester and New York

distributed in the United States exclusively
by Palgrave Macmillan

Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed in the United States exclusively by
Palgrave Macmillan, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York,
NY 10010, USA

Distributed in Canada exclusively by
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 07190 8358 7 hardback

First published 2014

Typeset in Minion by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

MANAGEMENT AND GENDER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

MANCHESTER 1824
Manchester University Press

IRISH SOCIETY

The Irish Society series provides a critical, interdisciplinary and in-depth analysis of Ireland that reveals the processes and forces shaping social, economic, cultural and political life, and their outcomes for communities and social groups. The books seek to understand the evolution of social, economic and spatial relations from a broad range of perspectives, and explore the challenges facing Irish society in the future given present conditions and policy instruments.

SERIES EDITOR
Rob Kitchin

ALREADY PUBLISHED

Public private partnerships in Ireland: Failed experiment or the way forward for the state? *Rory Hearne*

Migrations: Ireland in a global world
Edited by Mary Gilmartin and Allen White

The domestic, moral and political economies of post-Celtic tiger Ireland: What rough beast? *Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling*

Challenging times, challenging administration:
The role of public administration in producing social justice in Ireland
Chris McInerney

To Stella with gratitude,
To Emma, Suz, Mags, Claire and Lizzie in admiration,
To Eoin, Conor, Harry, Ciara, Isabel, Leo and Jeff in hope

Series editor's foreword

Over the past twenty years Ireland has undergone enormous social, cultural and economic change. From a poor, peripheral country on the edge of Europe with a conservative culture dominated by tradition and Church, Ireland transformed into a global, cosmopolitan country with a dynamic economy. At the heart of the processes of change was a new kind of political economic model of development that ushered in the so-called Celtic Tiger years, accompanied by renewed optimism in the wake of the ceasefires in Northern Ireland and the peace dividend of the Good Friday Agreement. As Ireland emerged from decades of economic stagnation and the Troubles came to a peaceful end, the island became the focus of attention for countries seeking to emulate its economic and political miracles. Every other country, it seemed, wanted to be the next Tiger, modelled on Ireland's successes. And then came the financial collapse of 2008, the bursting of the property bubble, bank bailouts, austerity plans, rising unemployment and a return to emigration. From being the paradigm case of successful economic transformation, Ireland has become an internationally important case study of what happens when an economic model goes disastrously wrong.

The Irish Society series provides a critical, interdisciplinary and in-depth analysis of Ireland that reveals the processes and forces shaping social, economic, cultural and political life, and their outcomes for communities and social groups. The books seek to understand the evolution of social, economic and spatial relations from a broad range of perspectives, and explore the challenges facing Irish society in the future given present conditions and policy instruments. The series examines all aspects of Irish society including, but not limited to: social exclusion, identity, health, welfare, lifecycle, family life and structures, labour and work cultures, spatial and sectoral economy, local and regional development, politics and the political system, government and governance, environment, migration and spatial planning. The series is supported by the Irish Social Sciences Platform (ISSP), an all-island platform of integrated

social science research and graduate education focusing on the social, cultural and economic transformations shaping Ireland in the twenty-first century. Funded by the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions, the ISSP brings together leading social science academics from all of Ireland's universities and other third-level institutions.

Given the marked changes in Ireland's fortunes over the past two decades it is important that rigorous scholarship is applied to understand the forces at work, how they have affected different people and places in uneven and unequal ways, and what needs to happen to create a fairer and prosperous society. The Irish Society series provides such scholarship.

Rob Kitchin

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Barbara Bagilhole who invited me to be part of the Women in Higher Education Management (WHEM) Network. Through WHEM I have benefited from many stimulating conversations and productive collaborations particularly with Teresa Carvalho, Kate White, Anita Goransson and Barbara Bagilhole and I am deeply appreciative of this. The University of Limerick facilitated my sabbatical at the Universities of London, Aveiro, Linkoping, Deakin and Melbourne and this enabled me to work in a sustained way with these and other colleagues, and I very much appreciated this.

My interest in gender and higher education dates back to the early 1990s, when equality in the university emerged from Dr Ita Richardson's work as a key concern among Women's Studies faculty and students. Dr Edward Walsh, the founding President of the University of Limerick, prompted me to think about how change in the position of women in universities might be achieved. My interest in management in higher education was heightened by my appointment and re-appointment as Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, by three Presidents at the University of Limerick over a ten year period. I am particularly grateful to Professor Roger Downer for his courage in initially appointing me, and to John O'Connor and Professor Don Barry who renewed that appointment, and from whom I learned a great deal about power and organisations. Human Resources, particularly the late Dermot Foley, and the current Director of Human Resources, Tommy Foy, kindly facilitated my access to data over the years. Thanks also to Mark Kirwan from the Higher Educational Authority and Lia O'Sullivan from the Irish Universities Association for access to unpublished data. I would like to thank Professor Tom Lodge and Dr Eoin Devereux for facilitating my re-integration into the Department of Sociology. My thanks to my colleagues in that Department; in Women's Studies; to those at faculty and Executive level in the University of Limerick; in Gender ARC; INTEGER and GENOVATE for their support. I am particularly pleased to be concerned with organisational

transformation through the EU funded cross national FESTA project (2012–2017).

My sincere thanks to Ann Ryan for her invaluable help in setting up the interviews for this study and to Pattie Punch, the faculty librarian for unfailing helpfulness in facilitating access to literature. I would like to thank Clare O'Hagan, Thamar Heijstra, Kate White and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. I am indebted to the series editor, Rob Kitchin and to Tony Mason and his colleagues at Manchester University Press, particularly Lianne Slavin and Katie Hemmings. I would also like to thank Martin Barr and Stella Reeves for their patience and skill in copy editing and proof reading (respectively) and Tommy Reeves for help with the index.

I have enjoyed stimulating conversations with Patricia Kelleher, Julia Brannen and Deirdre O'Toole over many years. Stella Reeves, Marian Mc Namara, Peggy and Patrick Caffrey, Linda Mc Kie, Fionnuala MacMahon, Gobnait O'Riordan, Clare O'Connor, Carmel Hannan and Helen Mc Cabe, all in their different ways, helped me to keep things in perspective at critical moments.

My debts of gratitude are greatest to the interviewees, who made time in their busy schedules to talk to me: without them this project simply could not have happened.

Finally, my love and thanks for the joy they have added to my life: to Emma, Suz, Mags, Claire, Lizzie and to the next generation: Eoin, Conor, Harry, Ciara, Isabel, Leo and Jeff.

Contents

Prologue: my own journey

Academic knowledge is only one kind of knowledge. It has been suggested that it can be usefully supplemented by experiential knowledge: 'knowing the world in a direct face-to-face encounter' (Lynch, 1999: 61). In this context, my own experience of ten years in an academic senior management position was a useful source of knowledge as a senior manager and as a woman, and was an important element in my decision to undertake this study. Sociologists are increasingly called upon to make explicit their own beliefs and experiences as part of a reflective process (Alasuutari *et al.*, 2008). I have identified (O'Connor, 2013) the critical moments on this journey.

In essence, for a sizeable proportion of my academic career my research interests avoided the public arena in general, and issues related to public power in particular. My M.Soc. Science in the 1970s focused on gendered subjectivity within a structural context, looking at middle-class married women's attitudes to being housewives and mothers in urban Ireland. My Ph.D. in the 1980s was also firmly focused on subjectivity in a particularly 'feminine' area, namely married women's close relationships with friends and kin. It was not until the 1990s that responsibility for a women's studies programme, and research on the position of women in two semi-state bureaucracies, raised my conscious awareness of gendered structural power. These led to a number of publications exploring the general position of women in Irish society, and specifically in semi-state structures (O'Connor, 1995a, 1996, 1998, 2000a). This marked the beginning of my positioning as a 'tempered radical' (Meyerson and Scully, 2011) committed to the objectives of (male dominated) academic structures and yet as a feminist, in an ambivalent position in such structures.

Much has been made of the disadvantages of such a position, with its risks of isolation, and pressures as regards co-optation, but it is also a position of visibility and personal authenticity. In my own case, it culminated (paradoxically) in my appointment as the first woman at full professorial level in the University of Limerick, and three years later (in 2000), in an invitation

from the then president of the university to undertake the responsibility of dean of the faculty for a three year period. The process of appointment at that time involved a series of stages including a vision statement; the taking of 'soundings' from colleagues as to my suitability for the assignment; as well as a private interview with the president. I had been supporting a colleague, who, for personal reasons did not go forward. In that context, since I was nominated, I decided to go forward as a voice for change. I was quite sure that I would not be appointed, but thought that continuing would enable me to influence the successful candidate's agenda. At the last stage, during the interview with the president, I realized that his understanding of other (non-gendered) inequality regimes meant that he identified with me. I was appointed as the first woman faculty dean, despite concern being expressed at the time about my being 'a single issue candidate' (i.e. only concerned with gender). I was at that time one of six faculty deans and the only woman.

I was subsequently reappointed by two other presidents, following competitive calls for expressions of interest in the assignment. Presidential power in shaping the process became increasingly visible, reflecting the increasing managerialism of the system. For the first seven years of my deanship, I reported to the deputy president. To my own and others' surprise I enjoyed being dean and was, I believe, a strong and effective one. My own experiences reflected Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2011) conclusion that the value of characteristics is related to the power of the person enacting or endorsing behaviour, rather than to the content of those characteristics or behaviours. Thus being seen to have power enabled me to redefine the gendered characteristics required of those in positions of authority within the faculty which was my specific area of managerial responsibility (i.e. the faculty of arts, humanities and social sciences). I also found that it was possible to effect change through 'small wins' and through 'authentic action' at faculty level and (symbolically) at university level (Meyerson and Scully, 2011: 193–6).

Following a restructuring of the faculties in 2008, I was reappointed as one of four executive deans (two of whom were women), reporting directly to the then president. As such I was a member of the most senior nine person senior management committee in the university, chaired by the president. During this period my research interests again moved into the private area, focusing on children and young people's narratives, albeit from a gendered perspective. However, a chance meeting, at a conference, with colleagues interested in looking at senior management cross-nationally, led to an invitation to participate in research on senior management, with responsibility for the Irish study.

Thus it was during my third assignment of responsibilities as executive dean that I undertook the fieldwork for this study, with the initial analysis being undertaken while still in that position. In 2011, having spent ten years at senior management level I did not to go forward for a further period and

took a sabbatical. Thus in undertaking the study my position was that of a long-serving, committed and successful dean, who also had a longstanding interest in gender issues. I was aware of both the structural and cultural reality of gender, and yet also of the possibility of agency. Indeed the impact of such agency (combined with structural opportunities arising from the development of areas where female academic staff were likely to be), was vividly reflected in the fact that the proportion of women at professorial level in my own university had increased from zero in 1997 to 34 per cent by 2012 (HEA, 2012). The inevitably of such changes was challenged by the fact that the proportion of women at this level in a university 100 kilometres away was only 12 per cent in 2012.

Thus, in coming to the study of senior management in Irish universities, I was an outsider/insider. It was a happy chance that my experiential interest coincided with the opportunity to participate in the cross-national study, so enabling me to locate these experiences not only in the context of an academic study of senior management in Irish universities but in a wider cross-national context (involving Portugal, Australia and Sweden, Turkey, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK: Bagilhole and White, 2011).

1

The big picture: universities in a changing society

Introduction

This book is concerned with higher education, and particularly with the gendered world of senior management in public universities. Higher education in general and universities in particular can be seen as the site of a power struggle 'since it is power that ultimately determines whose values gain priority and who pays the costs' (Clark, 1983: 264). The outcome of such power struggles determines the shape and purpose of higher education, nationally and internationally. There are limits to the power of those in senior management. These limits partly reflect the complex relationship between higher education and the state in contemporary society. Even more fundamentally, their power is limited by the changing relationship between the state and the market, both nationally and internationally. Those in senior management have little or no impact on the convulsions of national or international capitalism. Thus their positioning is complex: they are simultaneously at the top of their own organizations and in a less than powerful position in relation to the external structures of the state and the market.

In Ireland, with a small number of notable exceptions, social scientific research has tended to focus on the powerless. This has heightened a tendency to use their characteristics, lifestyles or choices as explanatory factors, rather than looking at elites and their priorities and experiences. This study was seen as a useful counterbalance in providing insights into the nature and transmission of privilege, by focusing on career paths leading to senior management positions; on support in accessing them; on gendered cultures, practices, stereotypes and narratives; and on the experience of being in such positions. It thus provides an important insight into a specific Irish elite, from the vantage point of an academic and practitioner who was part of that elite for ten years.

The focus on the most senior managerial group in Irish public universities senior management can be seen to include those at the top three levels (i.e. at presidential, vice-presidential, dean or executive director level, although the

titles vary between institutions). Some of these positions are held by academics, who undertake managerial responsibilities for a limited period of time and who become 'manager-academics' (Deem, 2006). However, other professional managers at vice presidential or executive director level (for example, in finance or human resources) are also included. The balance between academics and other professional managers in this senior management group varies between universities, as do its specific composition and size, although the president and vice presidents are always included.

In focusing on those at the highest level of senior management, attention is concentrated on a privileged group in terms of income, although their societal status is somewhat more problematic in a society where the university management system is opaque. Those in senior management in higher education can, at least potentially, shape the internal culture of their organisations and influence that of the wider higher educational context. Within their own organizations they play a critical role in defining and implementing recruitment procedures; overseeing curricula and prioritizing expenditures. They are also involved in 'the creation of knowledge, both in the local sense of organizational and managerial knowledge, and in the broader, more pervasive, sense of knowledge in and of society, indeed, of what counts as knowledge' (Hearn, 1999: 125). In all sorts of ways, their actions affect the life chances of those employed in these organizations and of the students who attend them. In so far as education is seen as relevant to economic growth, their decisions have wider societal, economic and cultural implications.

This chapter is concerned with the wider institutional and societal context, since this is seen as essential for understanding the challenges facing higher education in the twenty-first century. Thus it will look at the nature of the university as an institution; the relationships between the university, the state and the market; it will explore ideas about excellence and merit. Historically universities have been gendered institutions. Even now, they tend to be hierarchically male dominated, with the overwhelming majority of those in senior management positions being men. It will be argued that definitions of excellence and merit are typically constructed by those in power to legitimate and perpetuate their own position and privileges (Blackmore, 2002; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Indeed, Maher and Tetreault (2007) concluded that the term excellence is used, not so much as a mark of quality, but as a mark of privilege. As one moves up the career hierarchy in most organizations, merit frequently appears to be less defined by human capital (i.e. ability, education and experience) than social capital (i.e. social ties and political behaviour) (Sealy, 2010). Gendered processes effectively limit the available talent. Yet any kind of positive action for women typically generates references to meritocracy, the assumption being that the appointments of all men are unaffected by anything other than merit. Thus, in a context where women constitute roughly

six out of ten university graduates in Europe, and more than half the labour force, ignoring them means that the pool of talent is artificially reduced so that less competent men will end up being selected (Eagly, 2011; genSET, 2009 and 2010). Typically, however, the choice is presented as between excellence and diversity, the implication being that the former can only be achieved at the expense of the latter. It will be shown later in this chapter that this is increasingly seen as a problematic assumption.

In Ireland, there has been a tendency, particularly since the 2000s, to see gender inequality as an irrelevant concern. However, there is increasing evidence that such inequality is related to a variety of indicators of national well-being, including economic growth, social cohesion as well as personal happiness and well-being (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). The United Nations (UNDP, 1997: 39) concluded that 'no society in the world treats its women as well as its men', while the OECD (2012c: 18 and 13 respectively) refers to '[p]ersistent discriminatory social institutions and cultural norms' and concluded that: '[g]ender equality is not just about economic empowerment. It is a moral imperative'.

With a small number of notable exceptions, little research attention in Ireland has been paid to gendered processes in university senior management. The positive consequences of real diversity in management groups has been documented internationally, with particular attention being paid to its impact on 'groupthink' (Janis, 2011), and on the emergence of more innovative and creative solutions (Davies, 2011). 'Groupthink' was seen as contributing to the very unsatisfactory governance arrangements that were partly responsible for the recent economic crisis in Ireland (Clancy *et al.*, 2010; Murphy, 2012). Diversity is important in providing young people with role models: same-sex role models being important in women's career orientation, confidence and success (Mannion, 2011; Sealy and Singh, 2010). Of course gender diversity does not always guarantee the existence of diversity of thought. However, it is symbolically important in challenging the equation between masculinity and authority and in affirming women's existential value (Therborn, 2005).

In summary, this book is concerned with higher education and with the elite and the gendered world of senior management.

The university as an institution

Universities are one of the most enduring institutions historically and cross-nationally dating back to the late middle ages (Scott, 2006). In different countries and at different times universities have been established to transmit professional skills; to progress nationalism; to promote democratization; to create a professional elite; to legitimate access to power; to train young people for employment; to enhance economic growth; to promote internationaliza-