

Unequal Outcomes for Women Academics in Australian Universities: Reflections on Belinda Probert's 'I Just Couldn't Fit In'

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Abstract

The position of women academics in Australia is similar to that in other countries, where women are still under-represented in senior academic leadership positions. Why does progress seem to be so slow? This article hopes to contribute critically to the challenge entailed by Belinda Probert's (2005) work, "I just couldn't fit in": Gender and unequal outcomes in academic careers". It considers her conclusions in the light of the 1992-2005 data from one of Australia's newer universities, Victoria University in Melbourne. The paper also introduces a flow (or transition) model for analysing staffing changes in organisations that provides insights not usually presented in the literature on gender inequity in academic employment. The paper proposes a holistic explanation for persistent gender inequity, combining structural barriers in appointments with the unequal responsibilities women have for care.

Keywords

Women, academics, gender, higher education, Probert

Introduction

Women's participation in the academy in Australia has grown rapidly in the past decades. Staff profiles published by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) show that, between 1996 and 2004, the number of female academics grew by 5 per cent to about 14,750. In the same period, the number of male academics decreased by 5 per cent to about 22,500. However, in the academic hierarchy, 67 per cent of female academics are at the two lowest levels, lecturer A and B. In contrast, 45 per cent of male academics are at these levels. Only 11 per cent of female academics are at the most senior levels (D and

E), whereas 28 per cent of male academics are at these levels.¹

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Traditionally explanations of women's under-representation point to discrimination and bias in promotion and appointment and to the work-family concerns common to women workers generally. However, Belinda Probert, in a significant article, "I just couldn't fit in": Gender and unequal outcomes in academic

¹ Australia has a five-level academic scale prescribed by the Minimum Standards for Academic Levels (MSALs). The MSALs comprise part of global employment terms and conditions agreed upon by Australia's 40 or so universities and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which represents academics and many non-academic university employees. The levels and their designations are: A (tutor and senior tutor), B (lecturer), C (senior lecturer), D (associate professor or reader) and E (professor).

careers' (2005), has challenged researchers to generate better explanations.

The article derives from two comprehensive projects in Australia, and Probert's message is blunt:

... research into gender inequity in academic employment, in the UK and Australia at least, has been insufficiently willing to expose many of the most commonly accepted assertions to rigorous scrutiny, and that this has prevented us from properly understanding the remarkable persistence of unequal outcomes for men and women in terms of pay and status. I want to suggest that most of the factors that are widely used to explain the fact that women remain concentrated in the lower levels of the academic hierarchy are not supported by credible evidence. Many of these factors have had some real historical basis, but to remain focused on them is to ignore the substantial gender equity reforms that have been introduced in public sector employment over the last 20 years and their substantial impact. (2005, pp. 50-1)

The first aim of our paper is to continue the discussion of how best women academics can achieve equality in universities. Secondly, we hope to contribute critically to the challenge entailed by Probert's work. We will do so by considering her conclusions in the light of the 1992-2005 data from one of Australia's former colleges of advanced education that became a university in 1992, Victoria University of Technology in Melbourne. Thirdly, we will introduce a flow (or transition) model for analysing staffing changes in organisations that provides insights not usually presented in the literature on gender inequity in academic employment. We will simplify the analysis by focusing on one problem only, namely the pathway to the professoriate for women at Victoria University. This is also the main problem that Probert considers (2005, p. 70).

Probert's Criticisms of Prevailing Explanations

In this section we will outline briefly Probert's (2005) criticisms of existing explanations of gender inequity in academic careers. We will focus only on her main criticisms of the dominant framework, which argues unequal outcomes result 'from the unequal treatment at work of men and women in terms of any or all of the following: appointment levels, workloads, promotions, access to mentoring and other factors that contribute to career progression' (2005, p. 51). We will not labour points upon which there is little disagreement. For example, women academics spend more time than do their male colleagues on teaching compared with research and on student welfare and pastoral care (2005, pp. 57, 59, 60). Neither emphasis aids promotion. In the next section we will compare results from the data sources for her article – a national survey in 1998 and survey/interview research at the University of New South Wales in Sydney in 2002 – with our analysis of Victoria University institutional data.

Probert first questions whether women are disproportionately represented within casual employment (2005, p. 53). Here some additional data might help. Chart 1 gives the most recent available ratios of female casual academics (on an equivalent full-time basis) to the total of all casual academics in Australia. It confirms that women are not over-represented among casual academics. However, to say (correctly) that it is 'the *under*-representation of women in continuing employment that makes their numbers in sessional employment seem excessive' (2005, p. 53) is also to say (correctly) that the proportion of women employed casually is higher than that of men. That is, women academics are more likely to be sessionals. Chart 2 shows by state average the relative rates of casual employment of women and men, which is a way of representing the likelihood of being employed casually. The point is not merely semantic.

Source: DEST 2004 Staff statistics collection

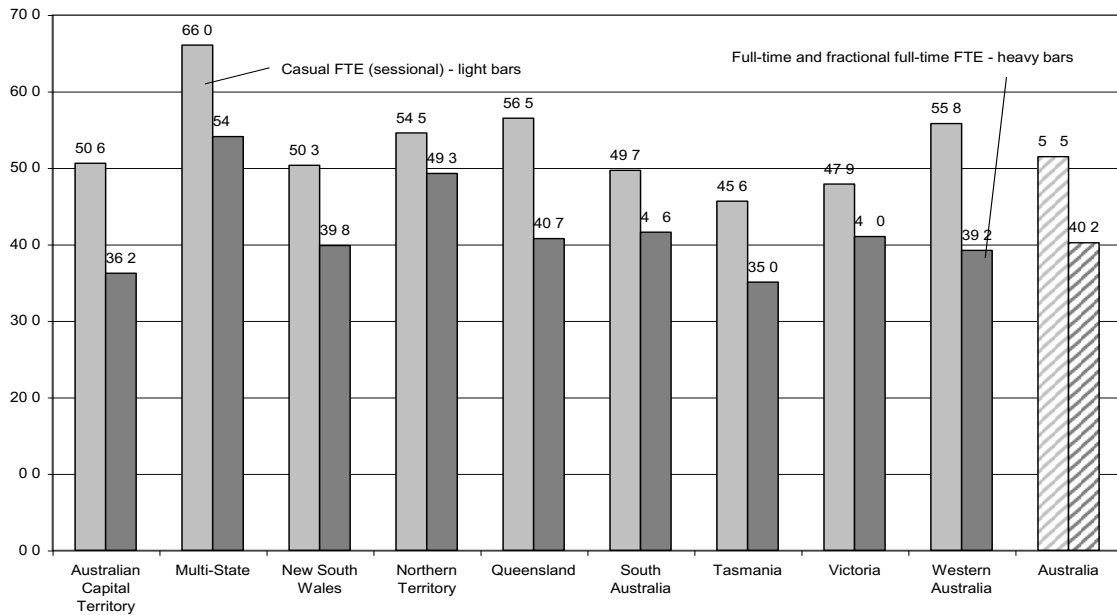


Chart 1: Female academic casual 2003 and continuing staff 2004 ratios (FTE) by State, Australia (%)

Source: DEST 2004 Staff statistics collection

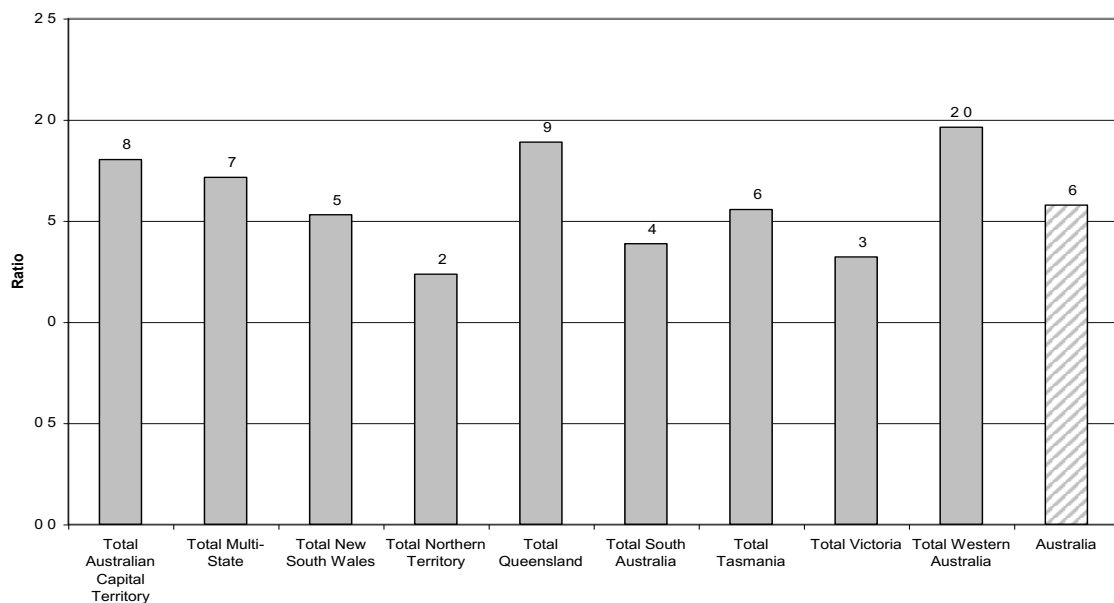


Chart 2: Ratio of FTE female academic casual proportion to FTE male academic casual proportion 2003-4 by State, Australia

Probert’s second criticism is more substantial. Noting that differences in level between male and female academics are the main cause of the ‘gender salary gap’,² she takes up the important concern of promotion. The article also considers starting levels because these, together with promotion, ‘allowed us to test the way that men and women navigate the academic career path, shedding light on how different levels are achieved’ (2005, p. 55). Probert’s tables 2 and 3 ‘show that one obvious cause of gender

² The results derive from regression modelling (2005, p. 54). Less important independent variables were length of academic career and level of qualification. The former accounts for levels within levels: for most part incremental advancement within levels A to D occurs annually (see Probert 2005, p. 56). The latter has an effect on starting level, which in turn would influence remuneration. It seems to us that the most important problem here is to try to explain gender differences in level.

stratification is that men begin their academic careers at higher levels than women'. Moreover the data on starting qualification 'show that there is good evidence to support the conclusion' that 'men are better qualified at the time of their first appointment' (2005, p. 55). In particular a greater proportion of men held PhDs.

The Australian data in table 1, showing the proportion of academics holding research or coursework doctorates by State in 2004, support to this conclusion. These are not starting qualification percentages, but they are a reasonable proxy. Probert notes 'that among those who begin their career without a Ph.D., women are also less likely to go on and complete one than men' (2005, p. 56). A greater proportion of Australia's male academics do have doctorates. This fact will help to explain some average differences in levels between women and men. However, we doubt its efficacy in helping to explain the very small proportions of women in the Australian professoriate (academic levels D and E). According to DEST (2005) almost 62 per cent of male academics have doctorates, while 28.9 per cent are at levels D and E (a ratio of 2.1 to one). Almost 46 per cent of women academics have doctorates, while 11.2 per cent are at levels D and E (a ratio of 4.1 to one).

Source: DEST 2004 Staff statistics collection

<i>State</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Persons</i>
Australian Capital Territory	76.5	61.3	71.6
<i>Multi-State</i>	52.2	32.0	41.1
<i>New South Wales</i>	61.4	47.7	56.2
<i>Northern Territory</i>	32.1	15.0	23.5
<i>Queensland</i>	65.8	52.1	60.6
<i>South Australia</i>	64.2	45.8	56.8
<i>Tasmania</i>	64.2	48.5	58.5
<i>Victoria</i>	58.3	40.7	50.8
<i>Western Australia</i>	57.0	42.9	51.5
<i>Australia</i>	61.8	45.8	55.5

Table 1: Full-time and fractional full-time academics with Doctorates by State (% of gender)

Probert's arguments regarding promotion are stronger. 'It is widely believed among Australian female academics that they do less well than men in the promotions process and that this reflects either direct discrimination or systemic/indirect discrimination (Burton, 1997; Currie and Thiele, 2001).' Similar views exist in the UK. 'Others argue that promotion panels are likely to undervalue teaching compared to research and that this will also discriminate against women, who are assumed to invest more in teaching than research (Acker and Feuerverger, 1996).' Rather:

... in our UNSW study women are more likely to be successful than men when they apply for promotion, while in the national study the success rate for men and women was very similar. And this is so despite the fact that women do indeed tend to place greater weight on teaching and less on research when compared to men's applications ... The data from our research suggest that the explicit recognition of teaching quality in the work of academic staff, and changes to promotion criteria, have been successful in eliminating research bias in promotions outcomes in many universities, and there is no evidence of gender bias in promotions outcomes. There is, however, evidence that women are less likely to apply for promotion than men — or that men approach their careers more 'aggressively' than women. At UNSW 63 per cent of men have applied for promotion, compared to 53 per cent of women. Moreover, of the staff who do apply for promotion, men do so with greater 'intensity', applying for promotion more often than women. (1995, pp. 57-8)

The available Victoria University data on promotions and applications are perhaps even more dramatic in reinforcing the conclusion that women tend to be more successful when they apply for promotion. The problem is that women academics do not apply for promotion in proportion to their numbers. Table 2 provides the relevant data. To see the latter point, compare the workforce percentages (column 1) at the next lower level – the ‘promotable’ cohort – with the application percentages (column 3). To see the former point, compare the application percentages (column 3) with the successful-application percentages (column 4). Note also that actual promotion percentages across all levels equates to the percentages of female and male academics (columns 1 and 2, last row).

Sources: VU CURF (2006), VU EOWA Compliance Reports (1996-2005), Golding (1997)

* VU EOWA Compliance Reports for 1997 and 2000 were incomplete. Golding (1997) has comprehensive data for 1992-6.

	1		2		3		4	
	Per cent of FTE & fractional FTE academic workforce by level (average 1992-2005)		Per cent of promotions to level (average 1992-2005)		Per cent of total applications for promotion to level (average 1992-2004*)		Per cent of applications successful, i.e. promoted to level (average 1992-2004*)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Level A	53.0	47.0	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Level B	42.0	58.0	50.0	50.0	46.8	53.2	90.9	72.0
<i>Level C</i>	30.0	70.0	36.0	64.0	28.7	71.3	64.5	57.7
<i>Level D</i>	22.0	78.0	24.0	76.0	18.1	81.9	43.5	42.3
<i>Level E</i>	16.0	84.0	17.0	83.0	17.0	83.0	62.5	48.7
<i>All levels</i>	36.0	64.0	36.0	64.0	26.5	73.5	65.1	53.2

Table 2: Promotions and applications for promotion at Victoria University 1992-2005 (%)

The three final sections of “‘I just couldn’t fit in’”: Gender and unequal outcomes in academic careers’ (Probert 2005, pp. 64-70) offer an alternative emphasis to explain for unequal outcomes. We use the words ‘alternative emphasis’ rather than ‘alternative explanation’ to recognise that the dominant explanation also generally includes the cause of gender inequity on which Probert concentrates. Where Probert differs is that she excises standard institutional causes such as casualisation, promotion, appointments and workloads (2005, p. 70) and focuses almost exclusively on the work-family relationship. She says bluntly:

The absence of many women above Level C in the career structure would appear to be linked to the way households organize the division between paid and unpaid work rather than to discrimination against women in the workplace. (2005, p. 65)

Hitherto researchers have looked in the wrong places (at least in part). They should ‘rather, to focus more specifically on the impact of the household on men’s and women’s working lives’ (2005, p. 70).

Here Probert is on firm and familiar ground. She presents convincing quantitative and qualitative data to show, for example, that work-family relationships also explain why a smaller percentage of women than men have PhDs. Simply 62.1 per cent of the women who had children that were part of the UNSW and national studies cited a lack of time as the reason for not having a PhD. This was almost double the percentage of men with children who cited this reason. This in turn reflected the fact that women academics – just like their sisters elsewhere – overwhelmingly were responsible for the care of children. Conversely, while ‘almost all the partners of female academics were in full-time employment (91.7 per cent of national study)’, only ‘57.2 per cent of male academics had partners in full-time employment’. Moreover ‘almost a quarter of female academic staff also have caring responsibilities for aged parents –

22.3 per cent of these academic staff have caring responsibilities for aged parents, compared to 13.8 per cent of men' (2005, p. 63).

One of the reasons men have greater human capital in terms of experience is related to these childcare issues. Of academic staff with children at UNSW, 88.1 per cent of women report that their caring responsibilities had an effect on their career plans, compared to 51 per cent of men. Interestingly, almost half of these women indicated they had had to cut back their hours of work or stop work, compared to only 18 per cent who said that they had made a personal choice to stay at home. Of the men who reported that caring had an impact on their careers, just over 40 per cent also described this as requiring them to cut back on their work. (2005, p. 67)

Time constraints associated with women's disproportionate responsibility for care also helped to explain 'gendered patterns of research output ... [W]omen with older children explicitly acknowledged that research was the only thing that could be put off when the combination of teaching, administration, children and research created overload' (2005, p. 68).

Probert is careful to stress that to 'accept the importance of the household as the critical sphere in which mothers' ability to develop their careers is negotiated is not to reject the significance of workplace initiatives and policy (Probert et al., 2000b)'. Paid maternity leave, access to part-time jobs, transparent workload allocations and 'promotions criteria within a "meritocratic" framework appear to have had a significant impact in reducing gender discrimination'. It is just that Probert directs her central argument elsewhere, namely that such 'measures, on their own, are unlikely to ensure any substantial increase in the proportion of women reaching senior academic positions' (2005, p. 70). On that point we can only agree.

The Data and Experience at Victoria University, Melbourne

In this section we will discuss Probert's (2005) conclusions in terms of the 1992-2005 data from Victoria University in Melbourne. To make this task easier we will introduce a flow (or transition) model for analysing staffing changes in organisations. This will offer insights that literature on gender inequity does not often consider. Our focus will be on the pathway to the professoriate (academics levels D and E) for women. The database we will use is a confidentialised³ unit record file (CURF) of full-time and fractional full-time university academic staff according to their current duties (level) on 31 March of each of the 14 years from 1992 to 2005.

The flow model is a straightforward accounting model of workforce transitions from 1992 to 2005. In symbols we can represent it as:

$$F_n = F_0 + A + PT - PF - D - CB$$

The symbol F_0 stands for the average of the level totals over the number of chosen years (n). This is the average start-of-year figure for the level. To this we add average appointments per year to the level (A) and promotions to the level (PT). We subtract average promotions from the level (PF), departures from the University (D) and career breaks (CB). The symbol F_n is the result of the calculation, and it represents the end-of-year average based on trends in appointments, promotions, departures and career breaks.

Note that 'appointments' here means the appointment of a person from outside the university. Promotions means an increase in level, either through the University's merit-based personal promotions policies or through appointment to a position, which may have involved competitive selection open either to existing staff members or to existing staff and external applicants. Note also that we use the term 'net' for promotions to indicate that sometimes falls in level occur (e.g. when staff members have been acting in a higher position). Similarly people will take and return from career breaks over time, and

³ An awful term meaning 'made confidential'. We use it because the Australian Bureau of Statistics uses it for its 'CURF' products.

hence we use the term ‘net’ here as well. Using average data also allow us to smooth annual fluctuations and consider stylised projections.

Charts 3 and 4 and table 3 summarise the model as applied at Victoria University, a newer university in Melbourne. Chart 3 is for level E, while chart 4 is for the professoriate as a whole (levels D and E taken together). Table 3 is comprehensive. Following these is chart 5, which summarises the data in terms of percentages of the average increase in numbers of level E women and levels D and E women. For the sake of brevity we will concentrate on the most recent years, namely the 2000 to 2005 average annual workforce transitions.

The university’s senior-level academic workforce has experienced considerable turnover, especially at level E. For level E as a whole turnover now happens every 5.3 years (women 5.1 years). For the professoriate as a whole the time is on average 7.2 years (women 5.7 years). A small role is indicated for career breaks. However, the most important observation from charts 3 and 4 and table 3 is that appointments dominate promotions for the professoriate as a whole, especially at level E. For level D alone promotions are more important, but level D has fewer people than does level E.

Sources: VU CURF (2006)

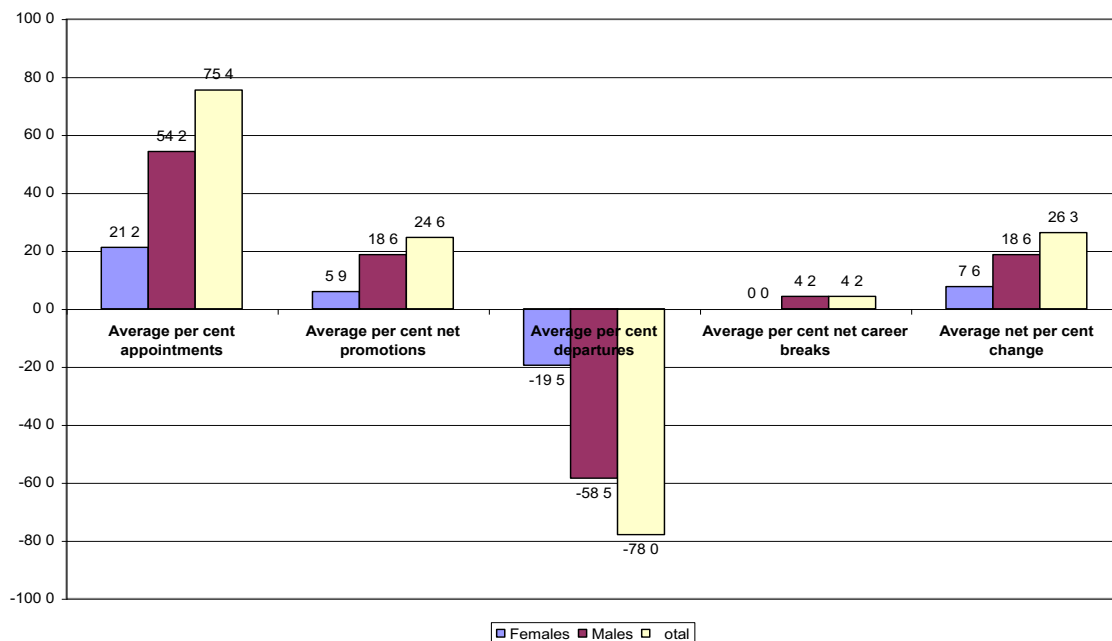
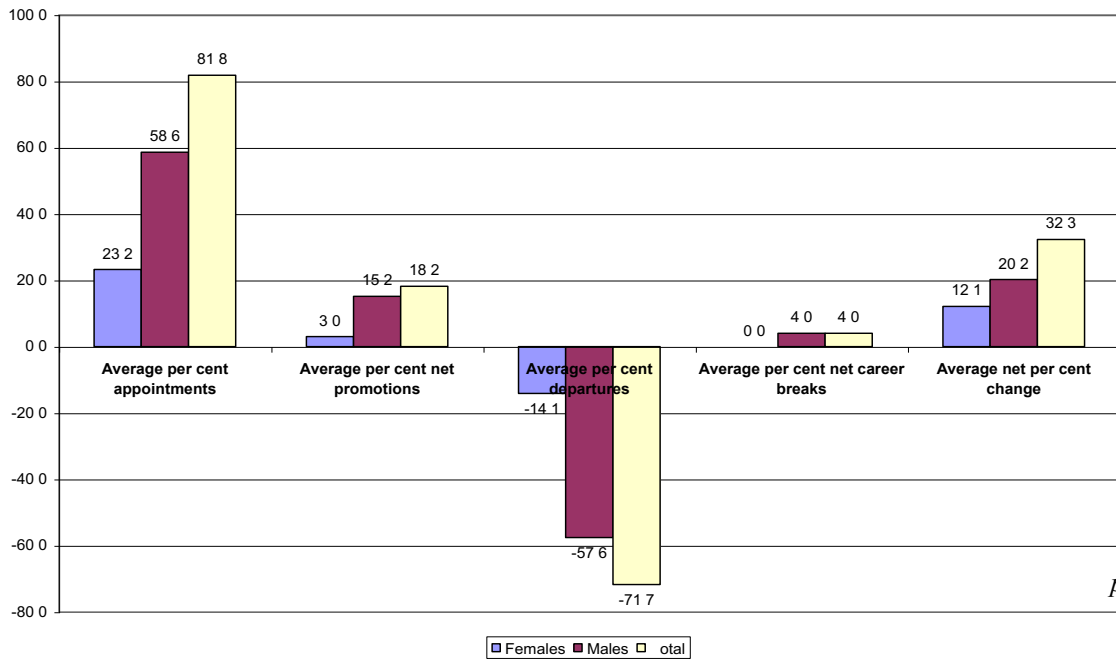


Chart 3: Average per cent of increase in level E (professor) total by gender 2000-5



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Chart 4: Average per cent of increase in levels D& E (professoriate) total by gender 2000-5

Sources: VU CURF (2006)

	Level D			Level E			Levels D&E		
	Females	Males	Total	Females	Males	Total	Females	Males	Total
<i>Averages 2000-2005 per cent of level total</i>									
<i>Start of year</i>	22.5	77.8	100.4	15.7	75.8	91.5	18.6	76.7	95.3
<i>Plus (+) appointments</i>	0.7	2.1	2.8	6.1	15.4	21.5	3.8	9.7	13.4
<i>Plus (+) net promotions to level</i>	2.5	7.7	10.2	0.8	4.0	4.8	1.1	3.6	4.7
<i>Less (-) net promotions from level</i>	1.1	5.3	6.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.3
<i>Less (-) departures</i>	3.2	4.2	7.4	3.7	15.1	18.8	3.5	10.4	13.9
<i>Less (-) net career breaks</i>	0.0	-0.4	-0.4	0.0	-1.1	-1.1	0.0	-0.8	-0.8
<i>End of year</i>	21.5	78.5	100.0	18.9	81.1	100.0	20.0	80.0	100.0

Table 3: Average annual workforce transition 1992-2005, 2000-5 per cent of level

Now the reason we have concentrated on *change* above is that it makes us consider a stylised ‘mode of entry’ to senior academic positions in this university. Mode of entry is the key first-order concept, we believe. Researchers can only fully explain women’s under-representation if we first know how universities fill level D and E positions. Table 4 summarises the data by converting the data to percentages of the increase in level E and levels D and E *before* deducting departures and net career breaks. This is because we are focussing on *entry*. Note also that we have created a net promotions row by subtracting promotions ‘to’ from promotions ‘from’.

Sources: VU CURF (2006)

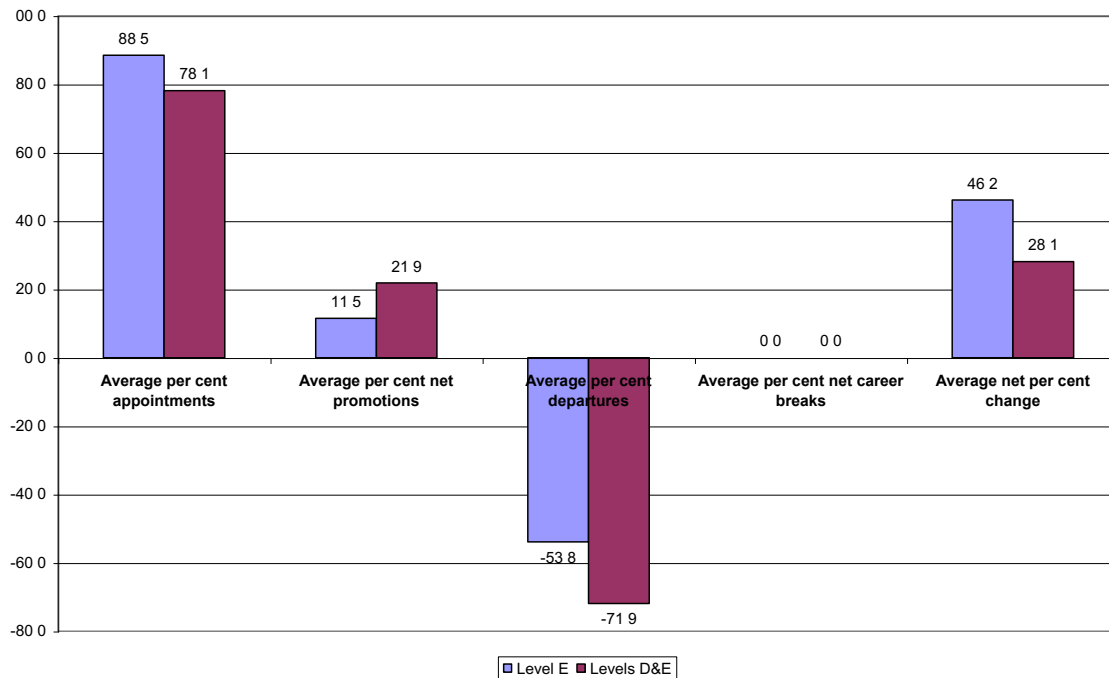
<i>Per cent of increase in level total</i>	<i>Level E</i>			<i>Levels D&E</i>		
	<i>Females</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Average per cent appointments</i>	23.2	58.6	81.8	21.2	54.2	75.4
<i>Average per cent net promotions</i>	3.0	15.2	18.2	5.9	18.6	24.6
<i>Increase</i>	26.3	73.7	100.0	27.1	72.9	100.0
<i>Average per cent departures</i>	-14.1	-57.6	-71.7	-19.5	-58.5	-78.0
<i>Average per cent net career breaks</i>	0.0	4.0	4.0	0.0	4.2	4.2
<i>Average net per cent change</i>	12.1	20.2	32.3	7.6	18.6	26.3

Table 4: Average per cent of increase in level total by gender 2000-5

The message conveyed to staff at this university by these summary tables and charts is not positive. The message conveyed to female staff aspiring to become academic leaders by progressing to the professoriate is *prima facie* disheartening. The narrative goes something like this for all staff members. The mode of entry into level E (i.e. becoming a professor) is overwhelmingly by appointment from outside the university. The 2000-5 average percentage split between external appointment and promotion is about 82:18. Prospects of promotion to the professoriate as a whole (i.e. levels D and E together) are better because external appointment to level D is less favoured. Nonetheless, for 2000-5, the split between external appointment and promotion is about 75:25 per cent for the professoriate overall.

The scenario is even bleaker for the University's women who might aspire to academic leadership. On average between 2000 and 2005 only 3 per cent of professors were women who entered by promotion, while 23.2 did so by appointment from outside the University. For levels D and E together the respective percentages were 5.9 per cent for promotions versus 21.2 per cent for appointments. Though the proportions of women at level E (26.3 per cent) and in the professoriate as a whole (27.1 per cent) increased, they did so by the University privileging external appointment over promotion.

Chart 5 demonstrates this starkly. On average for the years 2000-5 the percentage split between appointments and promotions of women to level E was about 89:11. For the professoriate as a whole (levels D and E) the average split over these years was about 78:22. The corresponding splits for men were about 80:20 for level E and 74:26 for the professoriate as a whole. The prospects for men within the University, too, are inauspicious, but they are a little less inauspicious than the prospects facing aspiring women academics. Alas there is not an especially productive internal promotions pipeline on which to focus. Rather we need to explain the dynamics of external appointment.



Source: VU CURF (2006)

Chart 5: Average per cent of increase in levels E (professor) and D& E (professoriate) female total 2000-5

On this question of focus – i.e. where researchers should be looking – we depart from Probert. We do not think that ‘lack of representation of women at levels D and E (the professoriate) cannot be ... directly discriminatory practices in appointments, promotions or workloads’ (2005, p. 70). Yes, we must also focus ‘on the impact of the household on men’s and women’s working lives’ (ibid.). Yes, our data confirm that promotions do correspond to gender-proportions in applications or, indeed, are relatively better for women, who tend to hold back until they are more confident of being successful. Yes, there is no evidence of gender discrimination in workload allocation⁴ Our disagreement is about the mode of entry via external appointment

First, Probert’s article does not pay sufficient attention to external appointment. She focuses more on promotion and starting level in academia. The latter is a different issue to external appointment to the professoriate. Secondly, the differences in ‘human capital’ suggested by male academics’ higher level of PhD attainment is not as relevant to appointment to the professoriate. Possession of a PhD surely influences starting levels in general, but at professorial level there are vastly more men and women with PhDs than there are positions. Of course, it is possible that newer universities will rely more on external appointment to the professoriate, and we offer this caveat. We note, however, that Probert’s conclusions are general and should therefore be able to apply at newer universities (of which there are many).

Secondly, we are not confident that discrimination does not operate at the level of appointment to the professoriate. Note that appointment is not like promotion because it does not assess individual merit as such. It seeks the ‘best person for the job’ or some similar outcome. Proportions of male and female applicants are not as relevant a consideration as they are with promotions. In fact they are relevant in promotions because we would expect equal merit among men and women in the applicant pool (with due regard for women’s ‘confidence’, as we noted above). The problem for women arises in competitive selection when the final step occurs: nominating the ‘best person for the job’. Doubtless selection panels observe procedural fairness and sex-discrimination requirements. However, these prima facie protections rarely control (i.e. compensate) for women’s unequal histories and the subtleties of power.

⁴ This is not to say that factors such as access to ‘research active’ status and an emphasis on teaching do not affect women’s workloads negatively. It is just to say that managements do not apply given workloads models in a directly discriminatory fashion.

They become insensitive to gender inequality and discrimination in the social distribution of the responsibility for care precisely when sensitivity is most needed.

Conclusion

We will conclude by offering our thoughts on why an emphasis on external appointment to the professoriate works against women academics and external women applicants for professorial positions. Our reasoning will combine the structural problem of external selection with 'the impact of the household on men's and women's working lives' (Probert 2005, p. 70).

While many women are capable of functioning in the professoriate – and desire to take on this academic leadership role – they confront the barrier selection: choosing the 'best person for the job'. Right at the time that panels make the crucial selection decision men's 'EO' activates: that is, the tyranny of *experience* and *occupancy*. Men tend to have this form of 'human capital' by virtue of incumbency, and incumbency is hard to shift. It is hard to shift for the underlying reason that women also are disproportionately constrained by the care responsibilities that most men do not have. The absence of equal responsibility for care allows men to accumulate experience through occupancy of jobs. It allows men to rise in levels and increments and to achieve higher rates of pay. For couple families, this reinforces men's role as primary breadwinner. Men thus accumulate more experience: experience nourished by occupancy.

Consequently a self-reinforcing causal mechanism operates. It offers a holistic explanation. Male numerical dominance through occupancy creates an academic culture and norms of experience in which masculine competitiveness and long hours of work can survive. These norms of academic experience do not favour women, especially women who have care responsibilities. The culture survives because men tend to be freed from most of the responsibility for care. The corollary of this is that many women pull back ('I just couldn't fit in') and become less forthright in pursuing their ambitions. That is, women's preferences adapt to the unfavourable circumstances in which they find themselves (Leahy & Doughney 2006a, 2006b; Doughney & Leahy 2005; Doughney 2007). This in turn reinforces the cycle of disadvantage.

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