

Case Report

Institutional Change and Organisational Resistance to Gender Equality in Higher Education: An Irish Case Study

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Abstract: Attempts to transform the gendered structures and cultures of higher education institutions have had limited success. This article focuses on one Irish university (pseudonym University A) where gender inequality was a major concern culminating in high-profile litigation. Using a feminist institutional approach, it asks: (1) What changes and interventions were introduced in the context of a favorable national policy environment and local grassroots support? and (2) how were these interventions perceived by staff? The methodology draws, firstly on the authors' personal knowledge of the local context; secondly, on an analysis of University A's key gender equality-related actions and documents; and thirdly, on a thematic analysis of qualitative data from 129 respondents in an online survey. Positive changes are identified, as is institutional resistance, reflected in low ambitions and focus on individualistic solutions. In the qualitative data, resistance involving denial; assertions that the problem is solved; the importance of meritocracy, and a focus on "fixing the women" (and the men) were identified. Acceptance of gender equality as an organisational issue was reflected in criticism of the interventions as tokenistic window dressing; not impacting on the culture and "not going far enough". The implications for effectively addressing gender inequality are discussed.

Keywords: gender inequality; higher education; organisational resistance; tokenistic; Irish



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1. Introduction

As many as 70 per cent of all change initiatives fail (By 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly then, attempts to transform the gendered structures and cultures of higher education institutions (HEIs) have met with limited success. The slow pace of change and the high level of institutional resistance in these contexts have been recognised and subjected to considered and scholarly analysis (Cockburn 2001; Benschop and Verloo 2011; O'Connor and White 2021a; Powell et al. 2018; Smolovic Jones et al. 2021), yet solutions seem elusive.

Promoting gender equality in academia has been on the EU agenda for at least 20 years, with recent calls by the European Council for national plans, strategies and targets in member states and individual institutions (European Institute of Gender Studies 2016). More recently the focus has been on Gender Equality Plans as a condition for applications for EU Horizon funding. The Council concluded in 2020 that improvement has been slight, with men still twice as likely as women to hold full professor (Grade A) positions in the EU (EC 2021)—broadly reflecting patterns in Ireland (O'Connor 2022). There is some variation by country (O'Connor and White 2021a) but overall progress is disappointingly slow.

This lack of progress is attributed to the persistence of gendered organisations (Acker 1990), where gender inequality is embedded in both their structure and culture. Resistance to gender equality is legitimated through discourses such as those based on excellence, gender neutrality and choice (O'Connor and White 2021b). More fundamentally, feminist institutionalist theory contends that attempts to bring about change have been undermined

by flawed understandings of the nature of the problem (Cockburn 2001; Benschop and Verloo 2011; Van den Brink et al. 2010). In particular, strategies that focus on individualistic approaches (such as “fixing women”) fail to address the gendered nature of institutional barriers and thus produce little lasting change. Even where structural approaches are identified, typically they are not fully implemented.

This paper explores the case of one Irish university, where gender (in)equality was a major concern over several years and where pressure both at the grassroots and national level potentially created conditions for structural change. A high-profile legal case there in 2014 stimulated other equality-related litigation and contributed directly to a sharpened focus on gender inequality, leading to a range of local and national policy interventions. It addresses the following research questions: (1) What changes and interventions were introduced in University A in the context of a favorable national policy environment and grassroots support? and (2) how were these interventions perceived by staff in the University? It finds that the measures adopted by University A had a strong focus on individual change, with some of the most potentially significant structural measures being effectively abandoned. Staff perceptions varied, with roughly similar proportions resisting and endorsing the perception of the problem as an organisational one requiring structural and cultural change at that level.

The paper begins by outlining the theoretical perspective. It then briefly describes the Irish higher education (HE) gender equality context and the grassroots campaign in University A. After the methodology, the findings are described and discussed, and conclusions drawn.

1.1. Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective is that of feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al. 2010; Krook and Mackay 2011). Building on the work of Acker (1990, 2006) on gendered organisations, and Connell (1987, 2002) on gender regimes, feminist institutionalism, sees gender inequality as embedded in the structure and culture of organisations with gender being seen “as a primary way of signifying (and naturalising) relations of power and hierarchy” (Mackay et al. 2010, p. 580). With a small number of exceptions (Verge et al. 2018; O’Connor and White 2021a; O’Connor 2020), this theoretical perspective has rarely been applied to HEIs.

In HEIs, gender inequality at an organisational level is typically seen as not only reflected in the under-representation of women in senior positions and the gendered construction of leadership (Fitzgerald 2018, 2021; Morley 2014); but also in the gendering of academic careers; the devaluation of women and of areas of predominantly female employment (as reflected in their perceived strategic importance, resourcing, working conditions, access to research funding and promotional posts; O’Connor 2020; Steinspodotti et al. 2018). Indeed, the majority of those at the lower level of other professional services are women, but they are severely under-represented in senior positions, with no promotion system in these areas in many Irish universities. Gender inequality is also reflected at the informal level in day-to-day interaction (Martin 2006), particularly in the enactment of informal power or micropolitical practices (O’Connor et al. 2020) that privilege men (e.g., through sponsorship or homosociability) and/or devalue or marginalise women through various forms of gender-based violence and sexual harassment (As 2004; Hodgins and O’Connor 2021; Miner et al. 2017; Naezer et al. 2019).

Male occupancy of positions of power, including professorships, has been remarkably resistant to change cross-nationally (O’Connor and White 2021a). Approaches and strategies for addressing gender inequality have been critiqued (Cockburn 2001; Benschop and Verloo 2011; Van den Brink et al. 2010) on the basis of their ability to challenge the gendered nature of the organisation. Benschop and Verloo (2011) and others critique the liberal “equip the woman approach” focused on the inclusion of women in male-dominated structures, which they see as seeking . . . “to give disadvantaged groups a boost up the ladder, while leaving

the structure of that ladder and the disadvantages it entails just as before” (Cockburn 2001, p. 217).

Benschop and Verloo (2011) identify two structural approaches: a radical equality one “that makes equality of outcome a central goal” and includes positive discrimination measures such as quotas; and a structural transformation or gender mainstreaming one that aims to transform organisational processes and practices through gender budgeting, gender impact assessment, etc. “Gender mainstreaming” has been advocated by the EU for over 20 years (Benschop and Verloo 2011), yet the term has become depoliticized (Powell et al. 2018) with McGauran (2009) showing how attempts to implement it were subverted. Thus, structural interventions are prey to degendering, depoliticisation and neutralising (Powell et al. 2018; Van den Brink et al. 2010).

Even Athena Swan (AS), the most well-known gender equality intervention, which purports to be an institutional transformation programme, is very far from this. In the UK, neither the existence nor the level of the award (i.e., bronze, silver or gold) has had any impact on the gender pay gap (Amery et al. 2019) nor on the proportion of professorial positions occupied by women (Graves et al. 2019). Case studies of the tiny group of Gold award-winning departments in the UK did show an increase in female representation at senior levels (ibid.). However, typically, even there, the focus remained largely on “fixing” the women rather than changing the organisation (Barnard 2017), with micropolitical practices that disadvantage women persisting (Graves et al. 2019).

Limited objectives and/or institutional resistance to more ambitious ones, are fundamental to understanding diluted, slow or no implementation of gender equality measures (Agócs 1997; Lombardo and Mergaert 2013; Peterson et al. 2021). Such resistance is defined as “patterns of organisational behavior that decision-makers or people in power positions employ to actively or passively deny, reject and refuse to implement, repress or even dismantle gender equality change proposals and initiatives” (Agócs 1997, p. 918). They legitimate denial of the problem and maintenance of the status quo.

Resistance is enacted by those with power in an organisation, both individually and collectively, who see gender equality initiatives as a challenge to their power and the privileged position they hold. That power is exercised through both overt and covert means and has been referred to as “stealth power” (O’Connor et al. 2019). Overt resistance includes the refusal to implement initiatives. Power can also be enacted covertly by questioning the methodology of the data that demonstrates the existence of gender inequality (Van den Brink 2015) thus preventing it being recognised as a problem. It can also be reflected in endorsing legitimating discourses, including those which stress the importance of merit (Nielsen 2016) in what is assumed to be a gender-neutral world where excellence can be measured objectively—assumptions that have been shown to be highly problematic (Campbell 2018; Ferretti et al. 2018; O’Connor and Barnard 2021).

Resistance can also be reflected in framing issues so as to limit the parameters of the causes of and/or solutions to problems (Burkinshaw and White 2017; O’Connor 2014, 2020; Peterson and Jordansson 2017), e.g., the idea that gender inequality is caused by women’s deficits of confidence or leadership skills (the “fix the women” approach) which can become internalised and form part of the organisational culture (Steinspodotti et al. 2018; O’Connor 2020).

Limited data are available on how staff in HEIs perceive gender equality initiatives; whether they have internalised frames that limit the problem parameters and the benchmarks they employ in evaluating them. Such data as exist suggest that those involved typically perceive the initiatives positively. Thus, Athena SWAN has been seen in Ireland and the UK as making it easier to raise gender equality issues and eliciting positive responses from participants, particularly champions (Graves et al. 2019; Ovseiko et al. 2017, 2019; Rothwell and Irvine 2022). However, raising awareness involves a much lower threshold than actually creating change. Given the potency of the grassroots campaign in University A, staff perceptions there are of particular interest.

1.2. Context: National and Local

Many countries have developed national policies and plans to address gender inequality in HEIs. Ireland is not unique in this respect. However, the context in Ireland is of interest given the interplay between events in University A and policy at the national level. University A, which had for many years been lagging behind other Universities in terms of the representation of women in senior academic and non-academic posts, was the defendant in two equality rulings. In the fall-out from a legal case there in 2014 (referred to here as “the R case”), University A was found liable for gender discrimination in relation to a senior academic promotional process, where 16 of the 17 successful candidates were men. University A had also been found liable in another gender discrimination case a few months previously (“the D case”). Furthermore, its promotional process in the R case was found to be seriously flawed (described as “ramshackle”). Immediately following the decision in the R case, five other women who had been shortlisted but not promoted in the same promotional process initiated legal actions, alleging gender discrimination. The resulting public opprobrium and reputational damage had the potential to create the conditions for radical action. These events contributed to a sector-wide review conducted by an expert group for the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2015–2016, and further stimulated the grassroots response within University A.

1.2.1. National Context

The HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions (“the Expert Group”) followed sustained work over the past 35 years by Irish feminist academics (O’Connor and Irvine 2020). It highlighted significant inequalities across the sector and identified a need for “radical action” if gender equality was to be achieved (HEA 2016a, p. 11). Consistent with feminist institutionalism, the Expert Group emphasised the need for a significant, cross-sectoral “organisational and cultural shift” (HEA 2016a, p. 11) to address systemic barriers and made a wide range of recommendations for all key stakeholders.

For HEIs, the Expert Group recommended that a minimum of 40% women and 40% men should be full professors (quota), at the appropriate pay scale, by 2024 (HEA 2016a, p. 72); that the cascade model (soft quota) be implemented at all levels (that is, the gender breakdown of promotions to a higher level should be proportionate to the level below). Recommendations in relation to leadership positions included the creation of a new role of Vice President for Equality in all institutions to drive change, and that demonstrable experience of advancing gender equality be a requirement for appointment to all line management positions (including the Presidency) to ensure gender-competent leadership. To further motivate that change, it was recommended that state funding be linked to the gender profile of senior positions (HEA 2016a, p. 103).

Recommendations were also made in relation to gender balance on key decision-making bodies, embedding gender equality in organisational culture (including developing gender awareness among staff, monitoring workload allocation models for gender bias, and gender-proofing recruitment and promotion procedures). Noting that other professionals were predominantly women, but that women were significantly under-represented in higher-level positions (HEA 2016a, p. 35), the Expert Group recommended that candidates at the final selection step for higher-level posts in these areas should be gender-balanced, and that greater gender balance should be achieved in these areas (p. 74). The purpose of these recommendations was “to be disruptive of the status quo and to force the pace of change” (Quinlivan 2017, p. 72). If implemented, they could facilitate structural transformation, as advocated by Benschop and Verloo (2011).

The Expert Group also recommended that all HEIs should be required to develop and implement a gender equality action plan (GEAP), which should be integrated into the institution’s strategic plan, with agreed targets and key performance indicators negotiated and evaluated by the HEA (2016a). Finally, following the launch of the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland in 2015, it recommended that HEIs should apply for and achieve an Athena

SWAN institutional award within three years, and that research funding be conditional on this. This proposal was immediately endorsed by the three principal funding agencies.

Given the systemic issues highlighted, a Gender Equality Taskforce was established in 2017 (HEA 2018). Among its recommendations were the development of a national programme to help managers and leaders to enhance their competency in advancing gender equality. Other national initiatives to enhance gender equality included the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI), launched in 2019, which involves the creation of 45 new academic posts at senior levels, over a three-year period, in areas where women were under-represented (HEA 2018).

All HEIs now have institutional gender action plans in place (HEA 2020). Six of seven universities established before 2019 have a minimum 40 per cent representation of women on their Executive Management and Academic Council and four of the seven on their Governing Authority (HEA 2021). For the first time in 429 years, there are women leading Irish public universities: with three of these seven universities (and five of the 12 universities in 2022) being led by female Presidents/Provosts (considerably higher than the EU figure: EC 2021). However, change has been limited in other areas. In universities, 27 per cent of full professors were women in 2020, compared with 21 per cent in 2014 (HEA 2021). The proportion of other senior posts held by women has also increased: 37 per cent of associate professors being women (up from 29 per cent), and 39 per cent of senior lecturers (up from 36 per cent). However, these overall figures conceal significant variations: for example, the percentage of full professorial posts held by women in 2020 ranged from 17 per cent to 35 per cent in different institutions, with the lowest being in University A (HEA 2021).

A second National Review of Gender Equality was announced in March 2022 (DFHERIS 2022). Again, it is to be conducted by an expert group on behalf of the HEA and is expected to make 5–10 high-level recommendations.

1.2.2. University A: Context and the Grass Roots Response

University A is a long-established, medium-sized university in Ireland. It is publicly funded and has around 19,000 students and approximately 2600 staff (University A website). It was selected as a research focus for two reasons. First, internal and external reports from 2004 to 2016 highlighted its (particularly) poor performance on gender equality, often identified as due to institutional culture. In 2013–2015, only 13 per cent of professors in University A were women, and only 19 per cent of non-academic staff on the top salary were women (HEA 2016b). Second, it was at the centre of a high-profile grassroots campaign on gender equality over a sustained period of several years, immediately prior to the carrying out of this research, following the R and D cases.

This litigation had a very high profile both within the institution and externally, attracting considerable interest from staff, students and the wider public. The successful claimant in the R case subsequently launched a high-profile social media campaign to support and advocate for the other women who had been shortlisted but not promoted in 2008 (“the five”, as the new litigants became known). She donated the substantial financial award she had received to fund their gender equality claims. Partly because of this, and partly because of the personal background of the complainant, whose grandparents were renowned advocates for women’s suffrage and gender equality at the foundation of the State, the R case received an extraordinary level of media coverage for an equality action, and was rapidly identified as a seminal decision. One study of three newspapers identifies 110 articles referencing the complainant up to March 2019, peaking in 2015–2016 (De Oliveira Filha and Oliveira Ruggi 2020, p. 53). The complainant’s portrayal as a “dedicated activist against injustice”, honouring her grandparents’ legacy (De Oliveira Filha and Oliveira Ruggi 2020, p. 54), lent much colour to the subsequent equality campaign.

Over several years, the campaign held several high-profile fundraising events, including a benefit concert, and developed and sold supportive merchandise. An anonymous cartoonist released cartoons on social media, satirising University A’s leadership and

gender equality record. These were curated into an on-campus exhibition, which was removed overnight by university security, leading to further bad publicity for University A. The Students' Union also campaigned on gender equality issues; for instance, students protested outside the building where University A's Academic Council was meeting, with placards and banners highlighting its gender profile ("81% Male": the highest in Irish Universities at that time: the then other six universities ranging from 73 per cent to 47 per cent (HEA 2016b)).

One staff trade union launched an equality campaign, supporting the five litigants, highlighting discriminatory academic promotional procedures and other forms of gender inequality, such as the lack of promotional opportunities for the predominantly female non-academic professional staff and the gender impact of precarious work, and demanding an independent equality review of all University A's activities. Supporters of the litigants arranged a "SolidariTea" coffee morning, well-attended on campus and embracing virtual support from coffee mornings in other HEIs in Ireland and beyond, including women deputies in the Irish Parliament. Members of a university gender equality research network organised a conference on gender equality in HE, and the successful claimant in the R case gave a high-profile "distinguished lecture" in University A, as well as a series of external lectures in academic and other fora, which were widely covered in local and national media.

The subsequent litigation received less coverage, not least because the litigants were restricted in their ability to comment while their case was pending (De Oliveira Filha and Oliveira Ruggi 2020, p. 53). Nevertheless, gender equality was very much a "live" issue within University A from 2014 onwards, with the five litigants attracting considerable public support there until a settlement was finally reached for all five by 2018. Much of this support derived from the attention the legal rulings drew to structural inequalities within University A and its processes. These included the differing standards applied to male and female applicants for promotion, the penalisation of women who identified as having taken leave for maternity and related purposes, the lack of transparency in the promotional processes, and the extraordinarily low success rate for women applicants for promotion at senior levels (Quinlivan 2017).

Thus, University A was under pressure to implement the national level policy requirements as well as under internal pressure from an activist campaign.

2. Methodology

A mixed-method study design was employed, drawing on data from a number of sources, to examine what changes and interventions were introduced in University A and how these interventions were perceived by staff. The study drew on data from a number of sources. These were: firstly, in-depth knowledge of gender inequalities in HEIs and personal knowledge of the local context involving the grassroots campaign; secondly, an analysis of key gender equality related actions and documents in University A; and thirdly, qualitative data related to staff perceptions of the gender equality interventions collected through an online survey. The study uses a constructivist–interpretive paradigm, predicated on the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed, subjective and context dependent.

Firstly then, in terms of positionality, the author team can be best described as representing an "insider–outsider" spectrum. All have worked in HE for many years and have experienced the impact of gender inequality regimes. All have taken the position of tempered radicals (Meyerson and Tompkins 2007) in HEIs. All had some involvement in the events in University A, but to varying degrees. While this approach raises issues related to access to information, bias, etc., no research is bias-free, and awareness of potential sources of bias can enable critical reflection (Smith and Noble 2014). The standpoint taken here is that the insider position provides insights unobtainable in any other way (Hodgins and O'Connor 2021), while the outsider perspective provides a critical analytical stance.

Secondly, the public actions taken by University A in the gender equality area are identified and a document study undertaken. Publicly available documents from the gender equality and promotional pages of University A's website were viewed, along with

other relevant reports previously published and/or made available to staff from 2014 to December 2021. The authors relied heavily on contextual knowledge of the University and its structures in the identification and interpretation of these documents.

Thirdly, qualitative data was derived from an online survey conducted by the staff Women's Network at University A. It was deemed most appropriate, given the focus on respondents' perceptions and interpretations. Ethical approval was obtained for this research. An invitation to participate was sent to all academic staff (at lecturer, senior lecturer, personal professor and (full) professor) as well as to all research and other professional staff, permanent and temporary, full-time and part-time, via the University email listing in March 2021 (n = 2381 persons). It should be noted that this listing is the general staff email (not payroll) and includes staff on career breaks, maternity leave, sick leave or recently retired. Questions were posed pertaining to perceptions of the treatment of both academic and professional women in University A since the "R" ruling, perceived changes in the representation of academic and professional women since then, factors influencing change, the role men can play in achieving gender equality and any perceived resistance to gender equality. While a survey methodology is not a typical way to collect qualitative data, focus groups or interviews were not feasible alternatives due to a combination of limited resources and COVID constraints. The data in this article are mainly drawn from open-ended responses to seven questions with unlimited open-text format response boxes. These data were analysed thematically. Responses were fully anonymised. In-text verbatim quotations include the following attributions: respondent number, gender (M = male, F = female, Y = prefer or did not say), staff group (A = academic, P = professional staff, R = researcher). The survey was completed by 129 persons, a self-selecting sample. This represents c. five per cent of the staff on the general listing. However, given that the listing includes retired staff and staff on various forms of leave, the proportion is likely to be higher in actuality. This was the seventh all-staff survey in the past four years and survey fatigue may have depressed the response rate. The responding sample comprised 54% identifying as female, broadly equivalent to the proportion of women staff in University A.

3. Findings

This section includes two sub-sections: firstly, the official institutional response including the documentary analysis, and secondly, a thematic analysis of the qualitative data involving staff perceptions.

3.1. The Official Institutional Response

In this section, we look at the indicators of the official response as reflected in the structures, policies, plans and actions in University A between 2014 and December 2021.

Following the D and R cases in 2015, University A established a Gender Equality Taskforce (GET) to advise it on measures to develop effective gender equality. The report of the GET, published immediately prior to the report of the HEA Expert Group in 2016, was notable for its disavowal of a "fixing the women" approach and its emphasis on cultural change (p. 10). Mandatory "soft" gender quotas, based on the flexible cascade model recommended for all academic promotions, were central to addressing some of the key barriers identified in the R case. A Gender Impact Assessment was recommended in relation to criteria for promotion and appointments, along with mandatory unconscious bias training for all members of interview and promotion boards and a promotion scheme for other professional staff. Governance recommendations included the appointment of a full-time Vice President of Equality and Diversity (VPED) as a member of the University Management Team (UMT), gender balance on all committees and working groups, and a comprehensive Gender Action Plan (GEAP).

The GET Report contained a total of 24 recommendations including leadership and governance, policies and procedures, capacity building and training, monitoring and implementation. However, despite the report's enumeration of various structural actions, and its concern to avoid a "fixing the women" approach, it also contained a variety of

recommendations that appeared to do just that; for example, the University was advised to help women to develop their leadership skills through the Aurora programme, to provide mentoring for all staff as well as limited research funds to upskill academic women on their return from maternity leave.

University A appointed a full-time VPED as a member of the UMT and Academic Council in 2016. Each of the University's four constituent Colleges subsequently appointed a Vice-Dean for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion to provide equality leadership at the college level. It also established an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Campus Committee. Hence a structure was created which could potentially move gender equality forward. However, following an unsuccessful first application for an institutional Athena SWAN award, getting this became a major part of the remit of the University's VPED. The University was awarded a Bronze Institutional Athena SWAN (AS) award in 2018 and reaccruited for this in 2021. A goal of the EDI strategy 2020–2025 is to achieve Silver-level institutional accreditation. Seven of 19 Schools have attained individual bronze awards. Developing and updating University A's Gender Equality Action Plans (GEAPs) has been a major focus—with the first one developed in 2016 and updated twice (GEAP 2 in 2019 and GEAP 3 in October 2021). It is arguable that these paper exercises have been at the expense of implementation.

Academic promotional processes were the basis of the R litigation, and online updates indicate some progress in addressing this. A cascade model was adopted in relation to the Senior Lecturer promotional scheme in 2017 but was subsequently removed. University A's website indicates that this was due to a shift from a competitive scheme with a limited number of places to a competency-based scheme, with no cap on numbers (promotional documentation: 2019). The website states that “any deviation from what would be expected in a flexible cascade model will be addressed if this arises”, while noting that such an issue has not arisen (GEAP 2). Therefore, University A's current promotional schemes do not include gender quotas or a cascade model, as recommended by the GET (2016) and the HEA (2016a). The removal of these arguably undermines the possibility of institutional change, as there is no guarantee that monitoring will be timely, consistent or transparent or will lead to an effective institutional response.

Surprisingly, the publicly available information on the GEAPs also do not mention changes to the Senior Lecturer promotional scheme (the subject of the R litigation in 2014). GEAP 2 indicates that the personal professor grade (treated by the HEA as equivalent to associate professor: see [Hodgins and O'Connor 2021](#)) is being replaced. Promotional documentation on the university website indicates that this new professorial grade is at a significantly lower salary scale not only than the (male-dominated) full professorship but also lower than the existing grade (effectively reducing costs). This potentially maintains gendered hierarchical segregation within the professoriate, since even if women access professorships, most may well be at the new and lower salary level.

GEAP3 outlines a range of other measures to support female advancement to the professoriate. Two out of seven of these are structural, i.e., designated schemes to recruit an additional four female professors, as well as matching any nationally awarded posts for female professors in areas where women are under-represented. Insofar as these positions are gained by external candidates, they may improve the gender profile of the professoriate while doing little for internal women.

The other measures in the GEAPs appear to demonstrate a return to “fixing the women”; for example, Heads of School should have “focussed career development conversations” with female senior lecturers to encourage them to apply for promotion; a number of consolidation grants should be provided “to assist high-performing women” to apply for promotion, as well as a new scheme to help women to prepare for academic advancement. There is also a reference to ensuring “a continued strong pipeline to SL and the professoriate” which implicitly rejects the idea that the low proportion of women in these senior posts reflects organisational factors, with the cause of women's under-representation being framed in terms of individual's deficits.

There are a number of other structural proposals in GEAP3, such as actions relating to maternity pay for postgraduate research students, the re-categorisation of certain academic contracts of indefinite duration as permanent, and clarifying the appropriate workload reduction for flexible and part-time workers. There are also some potentially useful actions in relation to data gathering: for example, in relation to the gender pay gap and intersectional staff data. However, with the exception of the maternity pay issue, the majority of these structural actions are not directly targeted at reducing gender inequality, although they may have that effect.

Updates on University A's website indicate good progress in relation to many other key actions, including the achievement of gender balance in governance and decision-making structures (a minimum of 40% male and 40% female). However, some significant actions are marked as "not started", "delayed" or "at risk" in GEAP3. Thus the "essential requirement" to demonstrate "experience of leadership in advancing gender equality" in all senior leadership roles is marked as "at risk", though there is a plan to address this and there is "evidence of its use in some posts". An action to ensure that staff in leadership positions "take responsibility for integrating gender equality in all processes and decision-making" is marked "not started", as is the development of equality-related KPIs for senior managers. Problems are also identified in relation to ensuring gender equality in workload allocation (marked "at risk") and the collection of gender data for research posts (also marked "at risk"). The action to "ensure gender equality and fairness" in workload allocation has disappeared in GEAP3, which now refers in general terms to ensuring "consistency and fairness".

Possibly because the R case involved an academic, there have been fewer actions targeted at other professional staff. For instance, GEAP 2 notes that job titles for other professional staff have not yet been fully reviewed to ensure they reflect the full responsibility and complexity of the relevant role. In GEAP 3 (October 2021) it is marked as "delayed". An action to develop a competency framework for the grading of professional and administrative staff is "in progress/delayed", as is the action to introduce a promotion scheme for them, which is identified as due to start in September 2021. However, there is no indication on the university website to indicate that this has happened.

In terms of actual outcomes, there are some indications of an overall improvement in gender equality in University A. In relation to governance, figures from December 2020 indicate that women made up 40 per cent of those in the Executive Management structure, 48 per cent of those on the Academic Council and 38 per cent of those in the Governing Authority of University A (HEA 2021). Thus, in two out of three of these structures, women constituted more than 40 per cent. This mirrored the Irish national pattern. However, it does mark a sea change in University A, which up to 2017 had been among the worst in terms of the gender profile of its governance structures (O'Connor 2020).

The proportion of women professors in University A has remained well below the national average. In 2020, 17.5 per cent of professors in University A are women, as compared with 27 per cent across the seven Irish Universities where such positions exist (HEA 2021). However, while University A lagged substantially behind other universities on this metric, its performance represented a significant improvement from its 2013–2015 figure of 13 per cent (O'Connor 2020). The most recent data on University A's website indicate that, as of December 2020, just under 24 per cent of professors are women; this includes the 17.5 per cent University A calls "senior professors" (professors in HEA terms) and 29 per cent of personal professors (in HEA terms, associate professors). At the same date, 46 per cent of those identified as senior lecturers are women. However, while the website expresses confidence that the target of 50 per cent female senior lecturers by 2024 is "comfortably within reach", it notes that the 2022 target of 26 per cent female professors (including associate professors) remains "very challenging" and that "working over-time to the 28 per cent target in 2024 may be more realistic". This suggests a low level of ambition given the national quota of a minimum of 40% of professors (excluding associate professors) to be women by 2024 (HEA 2016a).

The GET report (p. 53) noted that no promotions were available for other professional staff, with men being more likely than women to be recruited into these positions. In University A in 2015, only 19 per cent (three) of those on the highest salary scale were women (HEA 2016b). This had risen to 41 per cent (13 women) by 2020 (HEA 2021). This highlights the extent to which the gender profile of senior positions may change without improving the position of internal women.

This may also be an issue in the academic area—but the very different pattern in the two areas is provocative, and suggests that greater resistance to gender equality exists in the academic area (a pattern that has emerged elsewhere; O'Connor 2014).

3.2. Survey: Staff Perception

In focusing on the perceptions of gender equality initiatives, the frame of reference used is important. Thus, some respondents may compare a university's current performance with its past performance; whereas others may compare it with other HEIs, and yet others may locate its performance in some model of transformational change. Based on the qualitative analysis, two themes are identified in the responses of staff from University A: resistance to or acceptance of gender equality as an organisational issue (requiring structural and cultural change).

1. Resistance to gender equality as an organisational issue

Lombardo and Mergaert (2013, p. 229) define resistance as “a phenomenon that emerges during processes of change, such as when gender equalities policies are implemented, and that is aimed [at] maintaining the status quo and opposing change” (p. 229). These respondents resisted the identification of gender equality as an organisational issue. Four sub-themes were identified: denial of the existence of gender equality; assertions that the problem is solved; assertions about the importance of meritocracy, and a focus on “fixing the women” (and the men).

(a) Denial of the existence of gender inequality

In this view, gender inequality does not exist, therefore, there is no need for interventions to deal with it. The theme of denial, though present, was limited to a relatively small number of comments and included both male and female respondents. A female academic claimed that . . . “there is no institutional sexism or inequality at [University A] as this would be illegal. Men and women are already treated equally . . . ” (68FA). A male researcher insisted that he was not aware of any different treatment from or toward a particular gender, and described his department/school as “inherently and entirely equal” (94MR). There was an undertow of aggression in some of the responses, suggesting fear and a sense of being threatened:

Men and women are already treated equally (. . .) Gender politics is narrow-minded Suggesting that women are systematically discriminated at work is false, and counterproductive. . . . stop considering people's gender first and you won't have to favour or discriminate anybody on this criterion [sic] (40YP).

While an increase in the number of women securing senior posts was noted, it was perceived to be due to a “natural increase in female representation at senior level in recent years” (21MA). It was suggested that an increase in the number of women securing senior posts was not the result of the litigation but that “fewer candidates applying for roles were women then [sic] were men and in some cases none at all” (68FA).

(b) “The problem is solved”

There were many references in the data to improvements in the number of women on committees, in senior management roles and in securing academic promotions. The tone of these comments was that the problem was solved: “more women are applying, and being more confident in themselves” (42MA). Other comments by academics included:

The number of female representatives in senior academic positions has improved, to the best of my knowledge, over recent years, which is great. There is certainly a greater awareness of the importance of gender equality at all levels as well (29FP).

More women are represented in senior management, e.g., Vice President of Equality and two Deans are women. Governing body, Academic Council, the University management team and support services director's forum have good gender balance in their composition (71MA).

The reasons perceived for this gain in the number of women in senior positions included fair and transparent appointment processes and greater diversity on the promotion boards and interview panels. The tenor of these comments was largely uncritical, as it was assumed that increased representation indicated that underlying problems had been sufficiently addressed. While some noted that progress was “possibly” slow, and that additional work was required, the predominant view was that things had improved significantly. For example, one female academic commented:

There has been a sea change. There are still some significant improvements needed (the glass ceiling is not completely gone) so that all colleagues (women and men) have equal opportunity (98FA).

This perceived improvement was approvingly attributed to a “willingness by all parties to facilitate the change. Solid professional uncritically working relationships” (53MA), and to “positive leadership” (98FA). These respondents appeared unaware of the comparative position of University A nationally and focused exclusively and uncritically on changes there over time.

(c) Assertions about the importance of meritocracy

Resistance to the perspective that gender inequality is an organisational problem is seen in a reliance on the concept of merit; that is, that employment success is linked to personal achievements and excellence. In this view, posts or promotions are acquired when candidates meet standards, and it is assumed that these standards and their application are gender-neutral. Adherence to this notion of gender-neutral meritocracy is strong in academia (O'Connor and Barnard 2021; Morley 2006; Nielsen 2016). Comments from both male and female respondents called for a focus on merit rather than gender.

Changes in the gender balance of women in senior posts was described as welcome “as long as this is on meritocracy” (6YA). There was a “fear” expressed that “women will be appointed to vacant roles just to fulfil gender balance quotas and not because they are the better candidate” (52FA), and there was some suspicion that this happened. As a male professional staff perceived it: “I believe not always the best candidate is selected for a role, rather selected to adjust any gender in balance within a department” (76MP).

This can segue into concerns about overcorrection (Powell et al. 2018). The tone of comments expressing this view was antagonistic, describing quotas as demeaning and based on arbitrary ratios. A male academic, noting that “there are more women . . . for sure”, asks rhetorically: “Now is it based on fair ground? Did the promotion of some men get rejected as a result? I suspect the answer is yes. Transparency and equal treatment of everybody (end of quotas) are the only way to stop the deleterious situation which is slowly but surely building up.” (100MA). Similar comments reflected concerns about positive discrimination:

Women get preferential treatment and often use childcare to avoid work commitments. Also, [University A] is afraid to challenge women in the light of recent court cases. Women can basically do as they please. People should be promoted, appointed, etc., on the basis of merit not on gender or gender quotas. Employ the best person for the job (21MA).

I think the university is now discriminating against men. It has gone full circle. Some very deserving men have been turned down recently while very obviously less qualified female counterparts got the nod. It is not merit based. Giving soft appointments/promotions to women just because they are women helps nobody (34YA).

Resistance to quotas was observed by some respondents who did not subscribe to it themselves. One argument was that quotas can have a negative effect on women, who, having secured a promotion can be ... *"afraid that they will be seen as having been appointed because they are women"* (91FA), a situation this female academic described as *"quite demoralising"*.

Gender quotas are also being discussed and potentially being brought in, which are actually sexist and discriminatory and should not be the case at all. It is demeaning to think that women can only get into positions based on an arbitrary ratio—women and men are equally able to earn senior roles and perform in senior roles based on their own merit. Anything to fix numbers so that, e.g., 50% are men and 50% are women is discrimination (68FA).

Although these views were expressed by both male and female respondents, they were attributed to men, for example:

"Some male staff see this as unfair, as they do not believe there is inequality, and that women themselves are to blame. Snide comments, ill-informed discussions and opinions. 'jokes' about how to get promoted they should wear a skirt, derogatory comments each time a female is promoted or recruited to a senior post (along the lines of 'what did they do to deserve that')" (77FA).

(d) A focus on "fixing" the women (and the men)

Here the key to solving the problem of gender inequality is seen as "fixing the women"—reflecting a deficit model. This was evident in references to the ways in which women needed to be assisted, supported or "fixed" to help them meet standards that were assumed to be gender neutral (Benschop and Verloo 2011).

Comments in this vein included references to mentoring, supporting women with caring responsibilities with extended leave, and nominating women for committees. It was also suggested that women could be proactively engaged in *"discussion and decision making"* (20FP) and even that women should be fixing themselves:

Women should also take it upon themselves to be more empowered and find ways to improve their self-worth and belief in themselves because that is truly the limiting factor. Constant repetition of the 'I'm just a woman and that's why I don't succeed' or a 'poor me' attitude doesn't help things (126MR).

A similar perspective was evident in responses to a direct question as to what men can do to ensure men and women are treated equally, reflecting the focus on changes that involve individual behavior. There were references to changing behaviours that are perceived to be enactments of gendered power.

The most important thing that men can do is call out other men who are behaving badly rather than laughing it off (4FA).

Much of the commentary within the data referred to either men behaving differently or making a greater effort to understand gender equality. This could be interpreted as a recognition that men should take more responsibility for change:

It shouldn't be on women to fix their own oppression, which just oppresses them further, and unfortunately research shows that men are believed more when they speak about sexism (86FA).

It was suggested that men should actively speak out against unequal treatment, for example, when they perceive bias in recruitment to posts, assessment panels or committees, and that they should not participate in "manels" or other group activities that are biased in favour of men. Men should speak up when they notice "incorrect" behaviour, exclusion, dismissive comments or *"sexist and misogynist treatment of female colleagues"* (86FA).

There were also calls for men to understand and stay informed about equality issues and to monitor their own behaviours. The following response is typical:

Understand the reasons why gender inequality exists; be aware of the real issues that face women in their careers, in particular maternity leaves, caring responsibilities, unconscious bias; plan meetings and events during core hours; Ensure fairness and equality during any hiring, performance appraisals or promotion opportunities; when recommending candidates for scholarships, etc., always aim to support equal male and female candidates (122FR).

Men could actively support women by “highlighting achievements of female colleagues and students” (49MA), or “being aware of when a woman isn’t speaking and making space for her to speak by inviting her response” (88YA). More radically, it was suggested that men could make a greater effort to take on the devalued “pastoral” tasks that generally fall to women:

Take on more duties that are typically associated with female academics, such as being more welcoming to students to encourage them to seek their support, taking on work intensive administration roles. As line managers, making sure that such roles and duties of care are shared equally between genders (78FA).

Men, it was suggested, could also become more engaged in the structures that have been set up to address inequality, (e.g., Athena swan, EDI committees). The absence of comments about men acting collectively to challenge gendered structures was striking.

2. Acceptance that the problem is an organisational one

More than half of all comments reflected the view that improvements, while noticeable and welcome, were insufficient and limited in vision. Thus, while recognising some gains, it includes three sub-categories: criticism of the interventions as tokenistic window dressing; as not impacting on the culture, and as “not going far enough”.

(a) Criticism of interventions as tokenistic window dressing

These respondents suggested that the changes were introduced without any genuine belief in equality or commitment to the types of radical change needed to achieve true progress. Gender equality actions were seen to be “box-ticking exercises” (44FA) and “nominal gestures for sake of optics” (17MA).

A male academic noted that University A has a practice of buying in outside expertise that “fits the image of “equality of opportunity” (17MA), but which comes at the price of limiting progression for women within the university. While this improves the overall gender profile it does not facilitate women who have been waiting for promotions in a system that has been shown to be biased and reinforces the notion that they were inadequate, rather than that the system was unfair.

Similarly, a female academic noting the continuing poor promotional prospects for women, comments that “clapping ourselves on the back and saying “that’s that one sorted” is not the appropriate response, and a bit of “window dressing” doesn’t get to the core of the issue” (45FA). This view is shared by another female academic, who states that “the University are more aware of how unequal it has been (and has been seen to be) and are determined to demonstrate that they are better than they really are. It drives me mad as it’s tokenism” (91FA). Another example of perceived tokenism was running study groups and workshops on gender themes, which, the respondent noted, are only ever attended by women (31FA). Athena Swan submissions were also seen by some as tokenistic:

I see optics and window dressing. . . . Athena Swan is an absolute farce . . . Is this genuine change or just optics? (93YA).

Some change, what would ordinarily happen if equality were present, greatly trumpeted for image purposes. In many ways nothing has changed. . . . (90FA).

(b) Criticism of the interventions as not impacting on the culture

A related view is that, despite intervention, University A has not addressed the deeply gendered culture reflected in its way of working and the persistence of micropolitical practices and bullying behaviors (O'Connor et al. 2021).

Thus, reference was made to men using their masculinity to demonstrate power over women at an interactional level (8FR), for example monopolising meetings, and interrupting or speaking over women at meetings.

I think men get away with more—interrupting in meetings and being rude while women are more likely to be pulled back (or just not do so) and men seem to be making an effort to “occupy” virtual space with long rambling comments in large meetings. Some senior men behave quite poorly in some of the large school meetings. The most important thing that men can do is call out other men who are behaving badly rather than laughing it off (4FA).

One female academic described the greater weight accorded to male views as: “Inadvertent systematic blindness to the value of women’s suggestions and contributions persists at all levels” (26FA). The majority of senior management were seen to maintain “closed-door attitudes” and traditional “old fashioned decision-making processes”, despite “more positive language and attitudes” (77FA). This was summed up by some respondents as a persistent “Boy’s Club” mentality that has not been challenged or dismantled.

A concerted effort has been made to change things, but one can’t help feeling that if attention turned elsewhere, the university would revert to its former behaviour/culture quite quickly—not deliberately but just from neglect resulting in the systemic injustices reasserting themselves. It doesn’t feel like a cultural change (118MA).

Another example of the failure to really grasp the need for radical change could be found in comments about persistent criticism of institutional equality work. One female academic recalled: “being told that work on gender equality issues isn’t of strategic importance to the school and thus doesn’t count for promotion. I can’t count the number of eyerolls and negative comments I’ve heard from male colleagues about these efforts” (86FA).

The way in which the work of female-dominated disciplines is undervalued is further evidence of a lack of cultural change. One female academic noted:

Disciplines in which there are traditionally higher numbers of female researchers and students (e.g., humanities) are systematically undervalued in the university ecosystem—despite the fact that these are some of the highest performing areas according to factors like the QS ranking system. There is a tendency to dismiss research activity in these areas and little attempt is made to understand the ways in which it differs from research in areas where there have been traditionally higher numbers of male researchers. This has many unfortunate knock-on effects (70FA).

(c) Criticism of Interventions as “not going far enough”

Responses in this sub-category observed that while better representation of women exists in some areas, it is uneven. The failure to facilitate change in both the academic and professional spheres was evident to respondents, typified in the comments from female academics:

There are still far more men in professorial positions. The President, Registrar and Chief of Operations are all men. Three out of four of the College Executive Deans are men. And men seem to be disproportionately represented at senior administrative levels, despite the fact that most colleagues in professional support services are women (50FA).

It was noted that while more women have been securing senior lecturer promotions, the “key positions are still filled up with males” (59MR). In particular, “stagnation” is perceived to exist at the professorial level. For this female academic, the changes have been too few and too slow:

Remarkably little (change), for all the talk and the fact that it is SIX years ago since the ruling was made. The years of denial of a problem (. . .) was a disaster for gender equality in this university and held back any real change for years. There have been improvements in the past 3 years, but too few and too slow. (The University) was starting from such a low baseline that there was only room for improvement. For example, in the College of Science there has been a 500% increase in the number of female Profs in that time—which sounds great, but is actually an increase from ONE to FIVE, alongside 30–40 male Profs (77FA).

Some were critical of the persistent allocation to women of “housekeeping” roles (Heijstra et al. 2017). Women were seen to be likely to be successful in securing “caring” or “student centered” positions, but less likely to be given positions that drive University A’s strategy forward.

Some moves to achieve gender balance have simply involved co-opting more women onto boards rather than looking more widely at the kinds of roles they have. I remain unconvinced until I see women routinely appointed to Research Directorships, to the role of President or Registrar. I’d also like to see more men in student-centered roles—these are still predominantly held by women (a legacy of the “more caring” stereotype?) (32FA).

Women were seen to be excluded from the “tap on the shoulder” culture in male-dominated disciplines, and so continued to be unable to get themselves “on working groups and committees where they gain visibility whereas women are left in the home discipline ‘minding’ the students” (109FA).

A further way in which the gender equality programme was not considered sufficiently radical was the fact that it did not address unequal teaching and administrative loads. Some referred to the lack of prioritisation of these issues in their area:

I have also seen no local efforts made in my discipline or School to improve women’s promotional chances or address gendered workload disparities (70FA).

Responses also highlighted legacy issues relating to the accumulation of a “massive backlog” of women who did not secure promotion in the past 15 years, and for whom more radical intervention is required. For example, failure to promote women to higher grades in the past has had a knock-on effect on the kinds of institutional roles that women are now occupying:

Nothing has been done to address the cumulative effect/legacy of unequal treatment. There is a whole generation of women now in their forties and fifties that did not have any access to support at early career stage and were landed with excessive teaching and administrative load, and because of that missed the opportunity to set their research career on track systematically. Now they are too many years past PhD to qualify for grants that match their career stage which means they will not have any chance to be promoted, no matter who [sic] much they have given . . . (78FA).

Men still outnumber women by a significant degree at Dean level and even at Head of School. That ruling [the R case] had less impact than it should have initially (32FA).

Other professional staff at the lower levels were seen to have suffered from a decade of underfunding and non-replacement of posts, and it was understood that the lack of a comprehensive promotional scheme for them inevitably disadvantages women. This was described as “dreadful” and “crippling” (95MA) and, given the fact that most professional staff are women, was seen as further evidence of an unwillingness by management to recognise the true extent of gender inequality.

This perennial lack of career development support for female members of academic staff no doubt feeds into the underrepresentation of women in senior positions in some instances (70FA).

The apparent lack of urgency shown by University A’s management about the casualised, part-time academic workforce, which is believed to be predominantly female, was further evidence of an absence of radical change.

I still see more and more women wrongly graded, more women in (teaching) lecturer contracts, more precariously employed women with huge teaching workloads and more women being asked to take on more and more teaching by both male and female managers. The number of women forced to take unpaid leave to look after children this year [during the COVID pandemic] due to school closures is phenomenal (93YA).

Respondents made references to power, to men not being prepared to share power, and to a fear on the part of men that equality for women is “an obstacle to their own progression, as though there were a finite amount of equality to go around” (13FA). The resistance to diluting gendered power and its consequences in terms of silencing women can be seen in the following observation by a male researcher:

The choice to discard quotas in the most recent iteration of the senior academic promotions schemes was seen to have the effect of ensuring that female representation at senior levels is reduced to a very slow trickle that is still subject to the current institutional culture and unconscious bias. This has also ensured that lines of management are still heavily male dominated, which has led to the decision of several women to not dare to voice their concerns about gender-based discrimination since they are still answering to the same male-dominated layers of management. The negative painting of short-term quotas in turn makes some female staff feel that they should never voice any concern about gender-based discrimination out of fear of being perceived as less competent and seeking a shortcut to promotion. This is an extremely negative development (59MR).

4. Summary and Conclusions

This article explored the issue of gender inequality in one Irish university, where both national policy and local grassroots pressure demanded organisational change involving structural and cultural intervention. As such, University A presents an excellent opportunity to explore the limits and opportunities through a feminist institutionalist perspective, given a background of long-term gender inequality there.

In particular, the article explores the theme of organisational resistance. As the findings of this paper suggest, and as articulated by Agócs (1997) and Peterson et al. (2021), this resistance is not always overt, and can often be rationalised. The most radical structural intervention proposed at the national and local level, based on a cascade model of mandatory soft quotas in relation to promotions, was briefly adopted in University A, but subsequently abandoned as unnecessary and replaced with an unspecified and opaque monitoring system. This may be viewed as “the system” reasserting itself to negate a structural intervention. Other “rationalising” and “legitimising” narratives (O’Connor and White 2021b) are also identified in the survey findings as contributing to the slow pace of change in gender equality in HEIs. This can be seen in the focus on supposed meritocracy (which, however, is not further interrogated), or the view that “the problem has been solved”, or denial that there is a real problem at all. Although these latter views were not in the majority, it is striking that they were nevertheless strongly voiced, given the detailed national and institutional reports which outlined multiple structural barriers, as well as empirical data that clearly indicated high levels of gender inequality in University A. It is also particularly surprising given the high profile of such issues there due to the ongoing litigation and high-profile support campaign over several years prior to the data collection. The ruling in the R case, in particular, highlighted a range of very significant structural inequalities in University A, which had implications for gender equality far beyond the case of the complainant. While it is evident from the survey responses that many staff members were aware of these issues, others appeared to minimise or reject them. The findings are best explained by feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al. 2010; Krook and Mackay 2011), which highlights the persistence of a gendered organisational culture that is deeply embedded, internalised and reflected in the gendering of careers and informal day-to-day interactions; one which may continue to spur resistance to change, even in the face of overwhelming evidence and popular support.

Consistent with the critiques of Cockburn (2001) and of Benschop and Verloo (2011), the article also demonstrates a continued focus on individualistic solutions, even where the problems identified are organisational. It is particularly notable that both the national and the institutional reports (the HEA Expert Group and the GET in University A) emphasised the importance of systemic measures and explicitly rejected a “fixing the women” approach. Analysis of University A’s response does identify structural initiatives (though as noted above, arguably the most significant of these was discontinued). However, it also demonstrates a considerable emphasis on what may be termed individualistic “remedial” measures to address deficits in women, such as leadership training, mentoring, encouragement, and temporary career support. A similar approach is also identified in some staff responses, which suggested either that the problem lay in women’s failure to advance themselves or that barriers could be addressed by “fixing the women”. This form of resistance to organisational approaches has been noted previously (for example, Agócs 1997; Hodgins and O’Connor 2021). The general failure to focus on how men collectively can support structural change is also telling, suggesting that equality is, for many respondents, understood in behavioural rather than structural terms.

The article does highlight some positive changes, including the appointment of the VPED and College-level Vice Deans for EDI and the achievement of gender representation on committees (though not yet in senior roles). However, the pace of change in the gender profile of the professoriate remained extremely slow. This is reflected in University A’s own targets and updates, which noted that the achievement of professorial targets remained very challenging, even though those targets were very significantly lower than national ones.

It underlines the dangers of focusing on Athena SWAN awards as effectively the sole drivers of change. Some key initiatives were not progressed at all by University A or had stalled (for example, there was still no promotion scheme in place for non-academic staff). As highlighted in the survey responses, many staff regarded the University’s interventions as tokenistic and inadequate, as failing to address the underlying culture and as lacking in transformative effect, such as that described and advocated by Benschop and Verloo (2011) and O’Connor (2017). These respondents were much more likely to identify barriers as systemic and intrinsic to the organisational culture and connected to gendered power relations. This may be partly due to familiarity with the structural equality concerns raised in the R case and other litigation, as much as to personal experience and understanding of the broader context.

The study has a number of limitations. Firstly, it is restricted to a single institution and relies on publicly available documentation. This documentation is incomplete; for instance, University A’s original GEAP is not available on its website, nor is its Athena SWAN action plan, which contributed heavily to GEAP 2 and GEAP 3. Only current promotional documentation is available, replacing material on earlier schemes. Information on the implementation of the GEAPs is heavily dependent on the available updates; these are regular and detailed for GEAP 2, with a final update in May 2021, but only one very incomplete update (October 2021) is available for GEAP 3. This may be due to a key gap in staffing from July 2021 to January 2022. The study did not include engagement with university actors to seek further information since the focus was on publicly available documents. These limitations make it difficult to definitely identify the reasons for failing to progress key actions except insofar as the GEAP updates explain this.

Secondly, only c.5% of staff responded to the online survey, and these were unavoidably self-selecting. Although the gender breakdown of survey respondents was broadly equivalent to that of the overall staff profile, it was not possible to ensure that they were representative across staff categories. While many respondents provided detailed replies, the study design did not permit further exploration with participants. Significantly, it did not directly explore what effect, if any, the R case and local grassroots campaign had on the attitudes of survey participants. The research findings thus suggest the need for further exploration of the impact of local context and attitudes on the adoption and implementation of structural measures to advance gender equality in higher education.

Viewed overall, the findings of this research have two implications for addressing gender inequality in HEIs. Firstly, they indicate not only the importance of a structural organisational approach to equality, but the need to constantly reinforce this. As demonstrated in the case of University A, gender inequality is highly persistent and requires embedded structural and cultural organisational measures to address it. However, it may be easier (politically or practically) for many institutions to sidestep or ignore such measures in favour of more individualised interventions, which are less challenging to the existing culture or power structure and fit with a narrative of individual responsibility and merit. Secondly, and connected with this, is the cultural understanding of equality. Many key actors may have a limited understanding of cultural barriers and the practical operation of gendered power structures; they may therefore fail to understand why such intervention is necessary and may, in fact, actively resist change. This research demonstrates that even the most favourable national and local settings may be insufficient to overcome resistance.

Theoretically, the conditions that appear to be required to facilitate organisational transformation include acknowledgment of the need to change the structure and culture of the organisation; gender-competent senior leadership to champion implementation of interventions and initiatives; an awareness of institutionalised resistance and active strategies to dismantle it; and a preparedness to make visible and challenge the enactment of gendered power in micropolitical practices. In the absence of these, even a facilitative national policy context and grassroots activism are not sufficient to create that kind of transformation.

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