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Multi-Level State Interventions and Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions: The Irish Case

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Abstract: Much of the work on gender equality in higher educational institutions (HEIs) has concentrated on the organizational level. The original contribution of this article lies in its focus on state policy developments and interventions. We focus on Ireland as a specific national context, highlighting multi-level state interventions and looking at their impact on HEIs. Using secondary data analysis (including documentary analysis) and focusing particularly on the period since 2014, state initiatives to tackle the problem of gender inequality from various angles are outlined. They include the introduction of Athena SWAN; the Expert Group Review; the Gender Equality Taskforce; the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative; research funding agency initiatives and those around sexual harassment. In evaluating their impact, we look at the gender pay gap, the gender profile of the professoriate and senior management as well as other indicators of cultural change in HEIs. The article concludes that the best possibility of leveraging change arises when it is driven at the state (macro); the HEI (meso) and the situational (micro) level simultaneously, by gender competent leaders willing to tackle the historically male dominated, masculinist criteria, procedures, processes and micropolitical practices that are “normalized” in HEIs.

Keywords: state; gender equality; higher educational institutions; interventions; multi-level; gender pay gap; gender parity; Irish; professoriate; Athena SWAN

1. Introduction

Much work has been done on the persistence of gender inequality in higher educational institutions (HEIs) (Benschop and Brouns 2003; Heijstra et al. 2017; Morley 1994, 2013; Nielsen 2016; O'Connor 2014, 2020c; Van den Brink and Benschop 2011, 2012). However, with a small number of notable exceptions (such as Morley 2014; Blackmore 2002; Blackmore and Sachs 2007) much of this work has concentrated on the organizational level. In this article we focus on a specific national context, highlighting multi-level state interventions and looking at their gendered impact on HEIs. Using secondary data analysis (including documentary analysis) we provide an overview of the Irish state's approach as a case study for other EU countries who are interested in adopting strategies to deal with various aspects of gender inequality. We look specifically at the extent and nature of the state interventions, focusing particularly on the period since 2014. In evaluating their impact, we look at the gender pay gap, the gender profile of the professoriate and senior management as well as other indicators of cultural change in HEIs.

Gender equality is about having rights, status and opportunities regardless of gender. It is widely seen as a human rights issue (EIGE 2020; UN 2020). Using a binary gender perspective, the focus is frequently on gender parity: that is that the proportion of powerful positions held by women

in the institutional structures of society (including higher education (HE)) should be the same as the proportion of those positions held by men. This symbolically challenges stereotypes about the gendered enactment of power and its consequences. However, the idea of parity accepts the existing institutional structures and ignores social justice issues.

Gender equality has often been depicted as treating everyone the same. In an unequal world, where money, power, time and cultural value vary, treating people the same will perpetuate rather than reduce inequality. In order to create gender equality for women in societal and institutional structures (including HEIs) which have historically been created by men for men and which incorporate and normalize a patriarchal dividend (Connell 2005), it is necessary to transform the structure and culture of those institutions: to re-imagine gender relations and the taken-for-granted ways of behaving, allocating and valuing tasks, power and other resources. Thus, although in this article we initially focus on gender parity, we then look, with a more transformational perspective, at the impact of the various types of state interventions on indicators of the overall organizational culture in HEIs.

Ireland is a small country (population 4.94 m). Many aspects of gender equality have changed particularly over the past ten years. Traditionally it was dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, with a strong patriarchal ethos (O'Connor 1998). This was reflected in the ban on married women's paid employment in the public sector, which continued until 1973; divorce was introduced only in 1997 and abortion in 2018. There has been an increasing public awareness of the non-binary: with the identification of intersex, trans gender and other non-binary categories. The passage of the same sex referendum in 2016 to allow people to marry without distinction as to their sex, highlighted the extent of the social and cultural change. Ireland is now ranked 7th on the Global Gender Gap Index (WEF 2020). Nevertheless, the characteristics that are culturally valued and rewarded by access to power, position, cultural value, money and time are invariably enacted by bodies which are male, white and middle class (Connell 2005).

Up to 2019, the public university system in Ireland consisted of seven universities and 14 Institutes of Technology (IoTs). The creation of Technological Universities, formed by merging IoTs, added two further universities (so now there are nine). Only just over a quarter (26 per cent) of all those at full professoriate level are women (HEA 2020a), very similar to the EU at 24 per cent (EC 2019). Up until 2020 there had never been a woman president of an Irish public university (the current appointment is an interim one). There have been a couple of women at this level in the smaller IoTs with 2 of the 11 directors (equivalent to president) being women, compared with an EU average of 22 per cent (EC 2019).

It is recognized that gender is only one of the axes of inequality in HEIs with, as Acker (2006) noted, organizational inequality regimes being linked to inequalities in the wider social and cultural context. There has been an increasing national and global concern about intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), particularly race. However, intersectional data have not yet been published in Ireland, although there is a commitment to doing so.

The original contribution of this article lies in its focus on state policy developments and interventions and their impact on gender equality in HEIs. This is located in the context of a discussion on the broad issue of gender equality in higher education, a brief indication of the Irish context and a detailed presentation of the state interventions that have occurred in Ireland since 2014, followed by the indicators of change and the conclusions.

2. Gender Equality in Higher Education

HEIs are overwhelmingly male dominated. Across the EU men make up 78 per cent of heads of all HEIs (86 per cent of the heads of universities) and 76 per cent of those at full professorial level (EC 2019). Traditionally, access to management positions at all levels in HEIs was restricted to those at full professorial level. This has begun to change, particularly in the British and Irish system, with for example, professors being appointed as cultural leaders, without management responsibilities (Macfarlane and Burg 2018). Men however still constitute the majority of those in these positions.

Gender inequality in HEIs can be seen as involving “the differential evaluation of men and women and of areas of predominantly female and predominantly male employment” and the reflection of this in the under-representation of women in senior positions and the legitimacy of practices which differentially value men/women and facilitate/inhibit their access to such positions (O’Connor 2020b, p. 208). Much attention has focused on gender parity, i.e., the under-representation of women in senior academic and/or management roles. However, this focus reflects and reinforces wider patterns of discrimination and devaluation underpinned by a masculinization of the nature and purpose of HE.

Explanations for the perpetuation of gender inequality in HEIs are multi-level (Metcalf et al. 2010) and include the national and international level (macro), the organizational (meso) and the situational (micro). These are analytically distinct levels but in practice interrelate in specific countries. The national level includes the legislative and policy context. However, it is increasingly shaped by global processes such as neoliberalism with a focus on market capitalism, reduced funding for public HEIs and managerialist processes and procedures. There is increasing evidence that these global processes are gendered (Metcalf et al. 2010; Blackmore 2002). The elites at national and international level are predominantly men, with taken-for-granted masculinist priorities and perspectives. They typically embody the most culturally valued form of masculinity in particular historical contexts, i.e., hegemonic masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Connell 1995, 1987): “contemporary hegemonic masculinity is built on two legs, domination of women and a hierarchy of inter male dominance” (Kupers 2005, p. 716). As such it is ultimately opposed to tackling gender inequality.

For Hearn (2001, p. 70), changing women’s position in these structures requires changing men’s position since men are “a social category associated with hierarchy and power”. At an organizational level the structure and culture of HEIs reproduce gender inequality. At a structural level they do this through the gendered structure of careers and career paths, including the differential availability of senior posts in predominantly male and predominantly female areas; as well as through gendered criteria and gendered recruitment/promotion procedures (Van den Brink and Benschop 2011, 2012; Nielsen 2016). At a cultural level, gender inequality is perpetuated through a focus on gendered informal day-to-day interaction (micropolitical practices: O’Connor 2020c) as well as through stereotypes which depict leaders, managers and scientists in masculinist terms, so that women who aspire to or occupy such positions are caught in a double bind: if they are good leaders, managers or scientists they are not “proper” women, and vice-versa (Alwazzan and Al-Angari 2020; Fitzgerald 2018; O’Connor 2020b). At the situational (micro) level, the attitudes of men and women typically reflect those of the wider society and the HEI, depicting gender inequalities as “natural” and “inevitable.” However, formal and informal leadership can challenge such micropolitical practices, creating a context in which bystanders in lower positions on the academic hierarchy may be able to call out discriminatory practices and support whistleblowers.

Creating gender equality in these male dominated organizations is difficult. Thus, for example, pressure applied by the state involving legal or policy drivers can be nullified by normal practices at the organizational level, while strategies at the organizational level can be nullified by informal power or micropolitical practices. The best possibility of leveraging change arises when change is driven at all three levels simultaneously.

3. Background to Gender Equality in Irish HEIs

Ireland moved from an “elite” system of HE in the 1960s (with five per cent of the age cohort going to HE) to a “mass” one in the 1980s (15 per cent going) to what has been called a “universal” one (Trow 2010) with over three fifths of young adults entering HE (Reidy 2015). This dramatic increase partly reflects the diversification in the system, through the development of the IoTs, and partly the dramatic increase in girls’ participation (O’Connor 2014).

Issues surrounding women’s position in the academy have been raised in Ireland for more than thirty-five years (O’Connor 1999). In 1983/84 Smyth (1984) carried out a study on the position of women academics in HE. In 1985, at the recommendation of the then Minister for Education, Gemma

Hussey, a Committee on the Position of Women Academics in Ireland was established by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Their report (HEA 1987) showed that in 1975/76 women constituted under five per cent of those at full professorial level. By 1984/85 this had fallen to two per cent (see Table 1). Ruane and Dobson (1990) found that, controlling for academic discipline, qualifications, research output, teaching, administrative experience and career breaks (some of which could be regarded as effects of discrimination), women academics at that time were paid 10 per cent less than their male counterparts. The HEA established and funded the Higher Education Equality Unit (HEEU) in University College Cork and throughout the 1990s that unit convened annual conferences on gender and other dimensions of equality.

Table 1. Women faculty (full-time) as a percentage of those at each level in Irish Universities 1975/76 to 2019.

	1975/6 *	1984/5 *	1993/4 **	2004 +	2012 +	2013–2015 +	2016–2018 +	2019 +
Professor	5%	2%	4%	10%	19%	19%	24%	26%
Associate Professor	7%	5%	6%	15%	26%	27%	34%	37%
Senior Lecturer	3%	7%	12%	31%	33%	35%	39%	39%
(College) Lecturer	12%	23%	28%	43%	49%	50%	51%	52%
Assistant/Junior Lecturer	26%	34%	39%	47%				
Overall	11%	15%	20%	37%	43%	43%	43%	44%

* (HEA 1987); ** (Smyth 1996); + (HEA 2006, 2013, 2016, 2019a, 2020a).

Thus, the problem was early recognized. However, the Irish state has been (and indeed still remains) weak at implementing policies (OECD 2012). The Universities Act (1997) marked the overt endorsement by the Irish state of a managerialist agenda, and it increased the power of the president as the chief officer. The Act also included (Universities Act 1997) among the functions of a university “to promote gender balance and equality of opportunity among students and employees of the university”. It required the president to prepare a university policy on “equality, including gender equality in all activities of the university” (Universities Act 1997, 36:1b). The HEA was given an advisory and review role to promote gender balance among university staff; to prepare gender equality policies and to monitor their implementation (Universities Act 1997, p. 49). Thus, a legal framework was created which necessitated a focus on gender and the strengthening of the power of the president potentially provided a mechanism to achieve this.

In 2002, the HEEU was closed by the HEA. Without a dedicated driver, the HEA’s (2004, p. 59) own recommendation that universities develop equality action plans, which set out “explicit and challenging targets and timetables as well as the names of those responsible for delivery”, was not implemented. The decline in the national interest in gender equality was reflected in the failure by the HEA to even publish data on the gender breakdown of academic staff by level from 2004 to 2012. The opportunity to incorporate the state regulation as regards the proportion of women on state boards (introduced in the 1990s) was also missed in the 2007 HEA guidelines for university governance. The economic recession (2008–2014) provided an opportunity to further dismantle the national equality infrastructure (Lynch et al. 2012), and the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES 2011) made no reference to gender.

Thus, despite the early recognition of the problem, the path to gender equality as reflected in the position of women academics in HE has been far from linear in the absence of a national champion to drive implementation.

4. State Interventions since 2014

Documentary sources make it clear that gender equality in Irish HE came to the fore again in 2014. The Equality Tribunal (2014) concluded that Micheline Sheehy Skeffington had been discriminated

against by NUI Galway in the promotion competition in 2008 and awarded her E70,000. She gave this to the campaign for the five other women who had been shortlisted but not promoted in that competition. The subsequent Grimson report (Grimson 2016) recommended the use of the flexible cascade model in that university (i.e., that the proportion of women promoted be based on the proportion of each gender at the grade immediately below). This was a recognition that structural measures needed to be put in place to create change. Settlements were subsequently reached by NUI Galway with the other five women shortlisted in 2008. The problems in NUI Galway were not seen as unique.

There was also pressure on the HEA by EU funded projects: with GENOVATE leading on the development of national recommendations for staff gender equality in HEIs in 2012; INTEGER driving the adoption of Athena SWAN in 2014 (see below) and FESTA inviting the CEO of the HEA in 2015 to respond to the priority actions identified by all three of these EU funded projects. These diverse pressures culminated in a number of interventions (see below):

4.1. Athena SWAN: Its Introduction and Acceptance

Athena SWAN (AS) is a gender equality charter, which originated in the UK in 2005 and has been subsequently adopted/piloted in Australia, Canada, the USA as well as in Ireland (where it was funded by the HEA in 2015). Initially in the UK it focused on gender equality in the career-progression of women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM), and was subsequently extended to include all disciplines as well as professional, technical and support staff. Awards are given at institutional and departmental level and in bronze, silver and gold. The approach involves the development of a gender equality plan, based on quantitative and qualitative data collection, self-assessment, data-informed decision making, planning and monitoring by a self-assessment team, under a chairperson, potentially at senior management level. Applying for an award thus requires comprehensive critical self-assessment, combined with an evidence-based reflection on the results, and the identification of time-bound targets/goals to address any issues highlighted. It aims to provide a tailored approach to organizational structural and cultural change. An AS award, particularly at silver level, has been found to be associated with a higher ranking on the QS University World Ranking system (Xiao et al. 2020). As of March 2020, following extensive “soft” consultation exercises in the UK, it was recommended that AS would “shift from judging impact to supporting progress” (Buckingham 2020). The possibility that HEIs might try to achieve AS awards without actually undertaking organizational transformation does not seem to have been considered. The AS approach in an Irish context provides an opportunity to address this. Currently all seven of the original universities in Ireland have bronze AS awards, as do seven other higher education institutions. In addition, 42 individual departments hold bronze awards.

4.2. National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions

A five-person Expert Group was brought together by the CEO of the HEA in 2015, chaired by Máire Geoghegan-Quinn (former European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science 2010–2014) with the secretariat provided by the HEA. Members included national and international experts in equality from academia and business. The report (HEA 2016), which provided quantitative evidence showing that gender inequality was present in the HEIs, included responses to a national online survey of c.4800. The majority of these respondents believed that gender inequality existed in HEIs. Men were much less likely than women to see it as existing or to see it as extremely important: with obvious consequences since the majority of those in senior positions are men. Both men and women mentioned a “macho misogynistic culture”, a “boys club”, reflecting “attitudes of the alpha male” and said that “residual sexist attitudes were rife throughout the system.” This culture was seen as “often masked by the success of a small number of very accomplished women.”

The report (2016) made 61 recommendations targeted at all the main stakeholders (including not only the HEIs themselves but also the HEA, the parent department, other relevant state departments, the research funding agencies and all other structures that interfaced with the HEIs including Quality and Qualifications Ireland, The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, The Union of Students in Ireland and the Royal Irish Academy). The recommendations were detailed

and time specific and included the linking of state funding for HEIs to progress in addressing the gender profile of those in senior academic and management positions. Given the institutional importance of the professoriate in driving organizational and systemic change, it recommended that a minimum of 40 per cent of full professors at the appropriate pay scale be women by 2024 (a quota). It also recommended the introduction of the flexible cascade model; the creation of a vice-presidential post at executive level to drive developments in the area, with demonstrable experience of advancing gender equality being a requirement for all line management appointments up to and including the president (HEA 2016). Athena SWAN was seen as just one element in facilitating organizational transformation. It recommended that achieving the award at a specified level, within specified time frames, be a requirement for research funding. Recognizing the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach it recommended that all procedures, policies and guidelines of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) be gender proofed (putting the e into quality). Given the Royal Irish Academy's symbolic importance in validating academic excellence, it recommended a target of 40 per cent final female candidates by 2021 for election to membership of the RIA, with the objective of promoting gender balance in its membership (HEA 2016). Progress in these areas is due a review.

The purpose of these recommendations was "to be disruptive of the status quo and to force the pace of change" (Quinlivan 2017, p. 72). The slow year on year rate of change identified by the Minister for Higher Education (a new post) led to the establishment of the Gender Equality Taskforce in 2017 to identify actions that could accelerate change.

4.3. The Gender Equality Taskforce

The Taskforce (TF) was established by the Minister for Higher Education (2017) and its report on Accelerating Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions: Gender Action Plan 2018–2020 was published in 2018 (TF 2018). Its recommendations were targeted solely at HEIs. The five-person Taskforce was chaired by Maire O'Connor (a founding member of the 30 per cent Club in Ireland), and its membership included two presidents of Irish HEIs. It restated the linking of the HEA block grant to HEIs performance in addressing gender inequality. It strengthened the position of the HEA by recommending the establishment of a Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality under the auspices of the HEA to accelerate progress and share best practice across the sector in relation to structural change (TF 2018, p. 11). It reiterated the HEA's (2016) recommendation that an Enhancement Fund be set up to support innovative initiatives (TF 2018, p. 220). Its (TF 2018, pp. 10–12) major actions did not feature the HEA (2016)-recommended professorial quota of 40 per cent by 2024, although it has been included in HEA progress reporting. In addition to the recommended appointment of a full-time vice president for equality as a member of the executive management team (HEA 2016), the TF (2018, p. 30) included the option, under certain conditions, of a part time vice president/director for EDI appropriately resourced but still a member of the executive team. In a context where lack of gender competence has been a key inhibitor in HEIs (O'Connor 2020a), it recommended the development of "a national program to promote competency in advancing gender equality for managers and leaders" (TF 2018, p. 30).

The recommendations/actions of both reports have been included in the Strategic Dialogue and System Performance Framework against which individual HEIs are evaluated by the HEA and which can ultimately affect their funding. They have been endorsed by the Irish University Association (IUA) and by the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA).

4.4. The SALI

In launching the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) as a way of speeding up the process of change, the Minister for Higher Education endorsed the earlier professorial quota recommended by HEA (2016). The SALI involves the creation of 45 new and additional senior academic posts over a three-year period (equivalent to less than 10 per cent of all professorial posts, and roughly equivalent to the number of such posts that fall vacant every year). These posts are to be made available in areas

where women are under-represented so as to improve the representation of women in senior positions (HEA 2019b). Their creation reflects a recognition by the state that gender inequality exists in Irish HE at the highest point of the academic career ladder and that it requires a targeted initiative to address it. This is important symbolically and practically, although of course gender parity does not necessarily transform an HEI's organizational culture. The SALI complements the wider organizational change initiatives recommended by HEA (2016) and TF (2018).

4.5. Research Funding Bodies and Their Initiatives

The three main research funding agencies, Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), the Irish Research Council (IRC) and the Health Research Board (HRB) implemented the HEA (2016) recommendation that only individuals from HEIs with at least an AS bronze institutional award should be able to apply for research funding. They all now have organizational gender equality policies and plans, publish data for assessment board members, applicants and awardees disaggregated by gender, and require applicants to fully consider whether there may be a sex/gender dimension in their research content or their evaluative processes.

The IRC was the first research funding agency to publish a Gender Strategy and Action Plan in 2013 and to introduce a sex/gender dimension requirement into their research applications. Its "gender blinding" or anonymizing of funding applications and references (2014) was innovative and increased women's success rate in STEM post-doctoral awards from 35 per cent in 2013 to 57 per cent in 2017 (IRC (Irish Research Council) 2020).

In SFI, which is the largest national source of research funding, the percentage of women who have successfully achieved awards increased from 21 per cent in 2015 to 26 per cent in 2017 (Fritch et al. 2019) and to 28% in 2019 (SFI 2019) moving towards their target of 30% female award holders by 2020. Up to 2017/18, women were likely to ask for less funding than men. In subsequent calls, such as the Frontiers for the Future Program, SFI highlighted this. This ended that pattern, illustrating the importance of explicitly stating the behavior and culture change that is desired. Furthermore, in 2020, on that program, 35 per cent of the applications were from women candidates, but 45 per cent of the awards were made to women (Cheshire 2020). SFI have also introduced "gender blind discussion" of applications by panel members, without gender blinding the process. It remains to be seen what, if any, impact this will have.

There is no reference in the SFI Action Plan 2016–2020 (SFI 2016) to how SFI proposes to tackle the issue of the overwhelmingly male leadership of its centers, where most of its funding is directed and where the overwhelming majority of the Principal Investigators are men. In these contexts, processes such as homosociability are highly likely to operate (Grummell et al. 2009). The forthcoming Action Plan will need to include a strategy and detailed actions to be taken to achieve gender balance in center leadership. It should also include a review of SFI's current two-stage center assessment processes (involving an international peer review, followed by an internal executive review: a pattern whose consequences have been documented by O'Connor and Fauve-Chamoux 2016).

In terms of gender equality initiatives, the focus in SFI has mainly been on increasing women's applications (Fritch et al. 2019) i.e., a "fix the women" approach instead of addressing the structural and cultural reasons inhibiting women's applications. Two initiatives have moved beyond that "fix the woman" approach. The Starting Investigator Research Grant (SIRG) Program incentivized HEIs to nominate excellent female candidates by allowing them to increase the number of candidates that could be submitted per institution, from the original six to 12, provided no more than six of these were men. This increased the proportion of women applicants (from 23 per cent in 2013 to 47 per cent in 2015) and their success rates (from 27 per cent in 2013 to 50 per cent in 2015). Although the application level was maintained in 2018 (at 48 per cent), the proportion who were successful fell to 41 per cent (Fritch et al. 2019). This gender equality flagship program appears to have been suspended since 2018. The second initiative is the SFI Professor Program where institutions wishing to nominate candidates must include one woman as well as one man in their expressions of interest. These two programs very

effectively stimulate change in the structure and culture of HEIs and could usefully be extended by SFI and emulated in other research programs.

The HRB (2017) organized an external review of their decision making in the allocation of research funding and identified improvements to reduce gender bias, internally as well as externally. The assessment of the impact of this is still outstanding. The HRB also convenes a regular forum of the three largest research funding agencies and the HEA to discuss gender equality in research funding.

4.6. Sexual Harassment

The #MeToo Movement highlighted the issue of sexual harassment globally. There is limited data on such experiences in Irish HEIs: with such research as exists having been led by student unions (the earliest of these being USI 2013). The most recent one (Burke et al. 2020) found that 29 per cent of women, 10 per cent of men and 28 per cent of non-binary student respondents were raped during their time at college (i.e., experienced completed oral, vaginal or anal penetration while unable to give consent). There was also evidence from the National Sexual Assault Trauma Unit (quoted in McCarthy Flynn 2017, p. 2) that just under half of those who presented themselves to that unit identified themselves as students. The extent and nature of the sexual harassment and other types of gender-based violence experienced by staff is still largely invisible other than through Freedom of Information requests. It is increasingly recognized that the structure and culture of HEIs contributes to the likelihood of such experiences (Bondestam and Lundqvist 2020).

The Minister for Higher Education set up a working group that produced a framework around sexual consent in HEIs in 2019, with the aim of creating a campus culture which was safe, respectful and supportive. A total of E400k was given by the Minister to HEIs in Ireland to implement it. Several universities have now introduced workshops, courses and dramas on sexual consent and are implementing Bystander Intervention programs for staff and students. There is no national data on sexual harassment in HEIs, and no one is responsible for collecting that data or disaggregating it within police reports (McCarthy Flynn 2017). In a recent partnership initiative, nine third-level institutions set up REPORT and SUPPORT, an accessible platform, which will allow for the anonymous reporting of all incidents of sexual harassment, bullying, assault and violence by any member of the academic community. It will also provide information on supports available to survivors; reports on emerging trends, target key initiatives and campaigns and inform educational programs and policies.

In summary, since 2014, there have been a wide range of state interventions focusing on multiple stakeholders to enable the issue of gender inequality to be tackled on several fronts.

5. Indicators of Change

The clearest and most unambiguous indicators of change are the gender pay gap and the gender profile of academic and managerial positions. The implementation of the flexible cascade model for all recruitment and promotional activities and dedicated resources at the highest level to drive change can also indicate a structural commitment. Qualitative indicators of organizational culture can assess cultural change and could include women's perception of and familiarity with the criteria and processes for promotion, seeing them as evidence based, unbiased and fair; women being encouraged to apply for promotion; being satisfied that their most recent performance review was unbiased and fair; and being optimistic about their career prospects; being included on and encouraged to go for research grants and being invited to sit on internal and external key decision making bodies (Graves et al. 2019). The impact of interventions on criteria, procedures, work practices and other informal gendered micropolitical practices (O'Connor et al. 2020) is important, although potentially more difficult to assess.

Historically male-dominated masculinist organizations may well resist progress in terms of gender equality but still want to be seen as making such progress. In this context, institutional gender action plans whose impact is not independently assessed run the risk of simply exemplifying a rhetorical endorsement of gender equality. Monitoring and review by an external body can identify issues: for example, the gap

between Irish HEIs' glowing reports on their own progress and their failure to implement the cascade model at the critical senior lecturer level, while implementing it at other levels (TF 2018).

In looking at change we focus first on the gender pay gap and the gender profile of the professoriate and senior management structures, and finally look at some of the issues that have been highlighted in the British evaluation of AS in the context of organizational culture.

5.1. The Gender Pay Gap

The overall Irish national gender pay gap is 14.4 per cent (Eurostat 2017). The Irish state has been developing legislation to report on the gender pay gap and this may now occur in 2021. There is international evidence for the existence of gender pay gaps in HE (Amery et al. 2019). Partly these reflect the under-representation of women in senior positions, and partly the higher valuation of areas of predominantly male employment. There is no systematic national data available on a gender pay gap in HEIs in Ireland, with no attempt to update Ruane and Dobson's (1990) work on this topic.

Most academics in Ireland are appointed on an identifiable salary scale at each point on the career hierarchy (although (mostly male) research "stars" are occasionally appointed outside that scale, by agreement with the HEA: (DES 2017)). There is also anecdotal evidence that the entry level requirements for applicants in male-dominated areas (e.g., science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are lower than in female-dominated areas (such as humanities or nursing). There may also be gender differences at the point when the applicant is appointed within the scale and in the overall package offered to the candidate (e.g., relocation expenses). Even being offered a scale point higher than their current position can perpetuate historical gender bias since women have tended to be paid less than men.

5.2. The Gender Profile of the Professoriate

The under-representation of women in senior academic positions is not unique to Ireland. Across the EU, men on average make up 76 per cent of those at full professorial level (Grade A: EC 2019), compared with 74 per cent in Ireland (HEA 2020a). The assumption that such patterns reflect objective meritocratic decisions has been challenged, for example, by Van den Brink and Benschop (2011, 2012) in the Netherlands; Nielsen (2016) in Denmark and Brower and James (2020) in New Zealand. Globally, the proportion of women at this level has increased. Thus, for example, in 11 of the 14 countries included in one research study (Australia, Austria, Germany, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Portugal, South Africa, Sweden, the Czech Republic, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States and Turkey), the proportion of women at full professorial level was, in the majority of these countries, in the twenties (20.6 to 29.5 per cent) and was higher and more homogenous than in 2001/2002 (O'Connor and White 2021).

The proportion of women at full professorial level in Ireland increased from 19 per cent in 2013 to 26 per cent in 2019: an increase of roughly one per cent per year (HEA 2013, 2020) (see Table 1). This progress has been steady but not spectacular. It is not clear whether or not these trends reflect state interventions. Women's average "chances" of accessing a professorship in Irish universities still remain much lower than men's (1:13 for women as compared to 1:5 for men: Table 2). Assumptions that this simply reflects women's maternity leave, caring activities, lack of ambition, etc., are difficult to sustain in the face of variation between Irish universities: from 1:9 to 1:27 for women (O'Connor 2020a). Men's average "chances" of a professorship at 1:5 show little variation (1:4 to 1: 7). Increases in the number of professorships have facilitated slight improvements in women's "chances", while men's "chances" have remained the same.

Table 2. Percentage of women at full professorial level in Irish universities 2019; 2018; 2015–2017; 2013–Dec * and ratio of male and female professors to those below (rounded to whole number).

	% of Women at Full Prof Level 2019 Only	% of Women at Full Prof Level 2018 Only	% of Women at Full Prof: 2015–2017 (2013–2015)	Ratio of Male Full Profs to Those Below 2019 (2018)	Ratio of Male Full Profs to Those Below 2015–2017 (2013–2015)	Ratio of Female Full Profs to Those Below 2019 (2018)	Ratio of Female Full Profs to Those Below 2015–17 (2013–2015)
DCU	31%	30%	24% (19%)	1:7 (1:6)	1:6 (1:5)	1:16 (1:16)	1:19 (1:19)
MU	29%	28%	29% (23%)	1:5 (1:5)	1:5 (1:6)	1:9 (1:9)	1: 9 (1:12)
NUIG	18%	16%	12% (13%)	1:6 (1:6)	1:5 (1:5)	1:24 (1:27)	1:31 (1:28)
TCD	31%	29%	23% (16%)	1:6 (1:6)	1:6 (1:5)	1:11 (1:12)	1:16 (1:21)
UCC	24%	24%	19% (18%)	1:6 (1:6)	1:6 (1:6)	1:17 (1:17)	1:21 (1:22)
UCD	24%	24%	23% (20%)	1:4 (1:4)	1:4 (1:4)	1:11 (1:10)	1:11 (1:12)
UL	28%	31%	31% (31%)	1:5 (1:5)	1:7 (1:7)	1:11 (1:10)	1:12 (1:12)
Overall	26%	26%	23% (19%)	1:5 (1:5)	1: 5 (1:5)	1: 13 (1:13)	1: 15 (1:16)

(O'Connor 2020a); * (HEA 2020a, 2017, 2018, 2019a).

Local leadership has arguably also been important. The overall pattern conceals the fact that some universities (such as Trinity College Dublin, TCD), starting from a relatively poor base have made good progress: women's "chances" of a professorship in TCD increased from 1:21 in 2013–2015 to 1:11 in 2019 (Table 2). The "new" universities (under 50 years), such as the University of Limerick (UL), had an initial advantage and it led the field in 2012, with 34 per cent of its professoriate being women (O'Connor 2017). It has gone backwards since then, illustrating the importance of constant vigilance.

The Taskforce Report (TF 2018) showed that the majority of professorships were advertised, and there was no difference overall over the 2007–2017 period in the proportion of women who achieved a professorship in this way or through promotion. The total proportion who achieved a professorship was greater in the 2013–2017 period than in the 2007–2012 period. However, although the percentage of female applicants for professorships rose from 26 per cent to 32 per cent over that period, the percentage who were promoted rose only marginally from 27 per cent to 29 per cent. Thus, the success rate for women at professor level actually declined from 50 per cent in 2007–2012 to 45 per cent in 2013–2017 (TF 2018, p. 75). In contrast, at the associate professor level the increase in the percentage applying was mirrored by an increase in the percentage promoted: increasing from 29 per cent to 35 per cent in applications; and 27 per cent to 35 per cent in those promoted (TF 2018, p. 74). This shows that there is a particular issue in creating change at the professorial level.

5.3. Change in the Gender Profile of Senior Management

Ireland's score (at 50.00) on EIGE's (2020) Economic Power Index suggests that women's access to powerful positions is still an issue, as it is in many countries in the EU (EU average score is 46.8 out of 100). Sweden, ranked 4th on the Global Gender Gap Index, scores 71.7 on that economic power measure, which suggests that the problem is not inevitable.

Under the *Universities Act* (1997, p. 25), power is tilted in favor of the president, and the governing authority (GA) can "delegate to the chief officer (i.e., the president) any of the functions of the governing authority or the university relating to the appointment of employees of the university and the determination of selection procedures". Hence, in the Irish system, the balance of power rests with the president who has effectively total power over the appointment of senior managers—the extent of that power exceeding that in the UK, US and elsewhere in Europe. As previously mentioned, it was only in 2020 that a female president was appointed to an Irish public university (an interim appointment), although there have been a couple of female directors (2 out of 11: HEA 2020a) in the smaller IoTs. This contrasts with Sweden where roughly half of those at this level are women (Peterson and Jordansson 2017). The implications of this are considerable in the context of the impact of managerialism on the centralization of power in the president (Deem et al. 2008; Lynch et al. 2012).

Universities are seen to have three other important structures as regards governance and management: Governing Authority (GA); Executive Management (EM); and Academic Council (AC). GA's main power lies in its ability to appoint and if necessary, dismiss the president, although the latter power is rarely exercised. GA is chaired by an external chancellor and in 2017 varied in size in Irish universities from 27 to 40 people (O'Connor 2020a). Female representation on GA is now at least 40 per cent in five of the seven universities (HEA 2020a) as compared with six of the seven in 2018 (HEA 2019a). It is a considerable improvement on 2008, where only one university (Maynooth) was in this situation (O'Connor 2008).

Executive Management (EM) allocates resources, decides on priorities and is chaired by the president, with relevant appointments being made by him/her, typically for 3–5 years. It is largely advisory (consisting of nine to 14 people in 2017), with the president as the ultimate decision maker. Nevertheless, gender balance in EM is important both practically and symbolically. Following the HEA (2016) recommendation that state funding be linked to the gender profile of senior management, the number of universities reaching the 40 per cent threshold in EM went from zero (2016) to four (2017) and it is now five (HEA 2020a). This increase has not been linear, with only two of the seven

universities being in this situation in 2018 (HEA 2019a). It is possible that these trends reflect HEIs' perception of the priority attached to gender equality by the state.

The Academic Council (AC) is responsible for the academic direction of the university, albeit without a resource remit. In 2017 it varied in size from 54 to 413 people. Given these large numbers, it is difficult to see it as an effective management structure, although it is symbolically important. Currently, four of the seven universities have at least 40 per cent female representation on AC (HEA 2020a)—the same as it was in 2018 (HEA 2019a).

Analysis over time shows that Trinity College Dublin (TCD) did best in terms of having a consistent pattern of at least 40 per cent women on all three of these structures (GA, EM and AC) (O'Connor 2020a). This replicates its position as a leading institution in terms of the speed of change in the professoriate since 2013.

As the central oversight body, the HEA has a critical role in signaling the continued importance of the gender equality agenda, which has been endorsed at national and EU levels. The parent department of the HEA also has a particular role in implementing the recommendation "that gender equality will be recognized as a national priority and key system objective in the HE system performance framework" (HEA 2016, p. 93).

5.4. Change in the Culture of HEIs

Since the Expert Group Report (HEA 2016), there has been increasing recognition that the under-representation of women in senior academic positions reflects an organizational culture that favors men, a lack of gender competence among managerial leaders, and organizational structures, criteria and practices that result in men holding a majority of these positions (O'Connor 2020b). Culture is led from the top, and the HEA Expert Group (HEA 2016) included recommendations directed at the presidents, deans, and heads of department, which were endorsed by the Gender Equality Taskforce (TF 2018). However, gender inequalities are frequently maintained by micropolitical processes and practices (O'Connor 2020c). For the most part, in Ireland and internationally, interventions to promote equality are at the individual level (e.g., unconscious bias training and mentoring). These have limited effect (Wynn 2020; Kaley et al. 2006; O'Connor 2019). They are attractive to organizations who implicitly assume that "the problem is women" (O'Connor 2014) and that the organizational structure, culture, practices and processes do not need to change.

The myth that women do not reach the highest points of the academic career ladder because of low levels of ambition, lack of career planning or low self-esteem contradicts research which indicates that women are as ambitious as men but have significantly less confidence in their chance of success in the current environment (McKinsey & Company 2017). Structural and cultural barriers in HEIs mean that talent alone is not always enough to guarantee success (Wenneras and Wold 1997; HEA 2016; Holman et al. 2018). Gender biases in evaluation have been identified in experimental studies where both men and women evaluated the male curriculum vitae of a candidate more positively than the identical one with a female name on it, and favored a higher salary for the man (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). The construct of excellence, which has been widely used to legitimate the position of women in HEIs has been increasingly seen as problematic (O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016) with even those involved in constructing Research Excellence Indicators at the level of the European Commission recognizing it as a "value-laden concept" (Ferretti et al. 2018). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that women face a number of organizational barriers to progression, which are not experienced to the same degree by their male colleagues (Irvine 2019).

The recommended linking of the core state grant to HEIs performance in progressing gender equality as part of the Irish Strategic Dialogue Process (HEA 2016; TF 2018) potentially ensures that gender equality continues to be a key focus for leaders of HEIs, with 10 per cent of their institutional funding at risk if progress is not forthcoming. The institutions have to submit an annual progress report to the HEA, via the Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality, on the implementation of HEA (2016) and TF (2018) recommendations (with HEIs being asked to identify measures under both "organizational

culture and structures” and “supporting and advancing careers”: HEA 2016, p. 79). The publication of these would facilitate feedback, benchmarking and cross fertilization.

A key catalyst for momentum in addressing gender inequality in Ireland is the engagement of men in advocating for equality. This is particularly important given the fact that powerful positions in Irish HEIs are mainly held by men. This changes it from a “women’s issue” to an organizational issue (Irvine 2019). There is still considerable reluctance to recognize gender inequality as involving systemic power, including the power to define what constitutes valued knowledge. This problem is acute in race/ethnicity with the focus of the curriculum mainly on the global north. Thus, the recognition of other bases for inequality can heighten the focus on systemic power in a gender perspective and so increase the impetus towards organizational transformation.

5.5. Athena SWAN (AS): Reflections from the UK Experience

Even attempts at institutional transformation such as Athena Swan (AS) can be nullified by “normal” practices in HEIs. There is evidence that AS does create a context which makes it easier to raise gender equality issues and that it elicits positive responses from participants, particularly champions (Graves et al. 2019; Ovseiko et al. 2019, 2017). In the UK, neither the existence nor the level of the award (i.e., bronze, silver, or gold) 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). Indeed, the national percentage of female professors in science, engineering and technology (SET) increased very little between 2010–2014, despite this being the then focus of AS, while the proportion outside those disciplines increased substantially (SET:15 per cent to 18 per cent; non-SET: 25 per cent to 44 per cent: Barnard 2017). Graves et al. (2019) noted that there was a tendency for promotions to Senior Lecturer/Reader/Associate Professor to become more gender balanced in the period up to submission of an AS application: with 15 per cent of the departments having a 40/60 breakdown of promotions in year 1 rising to 31 per cent in year 3. However, this data referred to less than two thirds (n = 67/108) of the departments. It seems possible that many of the poorer performing departments were excluded because of less reliable/available data. The proportion of departments with gender balanced (40/60) shortlists also increased from 27 per cent to 37 per cent over the three-year application process (Graves et al. 2019). However, the fact that women remained a minority clearly indicates the ongoing difficulties, since when, for example, there is only one woman on a short list, her chances of appointment are mathematically low.

The Graves et al. (2019) survey of almost 3000 staff and students in institutions with an AS award showed that male academics were generally more positive about AS than their female counterparts. Even in HEIs that had won an AS award, micropolitical practices that disadvantaged women persisted (Graves et al. 2019). Thus women were less likely than their male counterparts to be familiar with the criteria and processes for promotion; were less likely to see them as evidence based, unbiased and fair; less likely to have been encouraged to apply for promotion; less likely to be satisfied with their most recent performance review; less likely to be optimistic about their career prospects; less likely to think they had adequate opportunities for training and development; and less likely to have been encouraged to take them up (although they were more likely to be mentored: O’Connor et al. 2019). Just over half of the academic staff saw AS as having a positive impact on the work environment or on work practices, with men more likely to see it in this way.

Case studies of individual Gold departments in the UK did show an increase in female representation at senior levels (Graves et al. 2019). This may well reflect their very strong positive departmental leadership and effective challenging of “chilly” organizational cultures. Even in them, men were more likely than women to be encouraged to apply for promotion and to be more optimistic about their career prospects. However, women in Gold departments were more satisfied with performance/development reviews, more familiar with the criteria and processes for promotion, more likely to have been encouraged to apply for promotion, and to believe that flexible working practices were available. Such departments are however a very small minority. Furthermore, even in such

Gold departments the focus was rarely on mid-career, senior academics or those at management level and even where it existed, the focus was largely on “fixing” the women rather than changing the organization (Barnard 2017).

AS started out and still purports to be an institutional transformation program. In these terms, one could conclude that AS, at least in the UK, is more effective in assuaging male anxieties surrounding the position of women in academia than in challenging male dominance, since micropolitical practices favoring men persist. It has also been recognized that the work of getting those awards is overwhelmingly done by women with potential negative impacts on their own career progression (Buckingham 2020). The gold departments do indicate that the problems are not insurmountable and raise the question of the importance of leadership in delivering institutional transformation.

The impact of AS in Irish HEIs has not yet been evaluated. It is arguable that AS has raised awareness of the issue: an awareness which has also been generated by the other national initiatives. It is also possible that AS’s embeddedness in the Irish HEA may increase its effectiveness in promoting a gender equality culture. Anecdotally, it appears to be seen as the sole mechanism for promoting gender equality in many HEIs. However, it is simply a framework to help develop a gender equality plan. The plan itself needs to be implemented if it is to bring about change. Gender competent senior leadership to champion this implementation is critical, as is their commitment to gender equality as a strategic priority (O’Connor 2020a).

5.6. COVID-19 and Gender Inequality

The COVID-19 crisis is clearly taking a social, economic and psychological toll, and already there are the first indications of its gendered effects (Ross 2020; Flaherty 2020; Kitchener 2020; Minello 2020). These have arisen due to the impact of a rapid switch to teaching online and working from home with additional caring responsibilities due to the closure of schools, childcare facilities and eldercare supports. Other emerging areas of concern relate to research funding and output, the pausing of hiring processes and the termination of precarious staff (including those on research contracts). There is a risk that the crisis could reverse the gender equality gains made in recent years. This will have consequences not only for women, but for HE, research innovation and economic growth.

It is therefore crucial that HEIs consider the gender dimension when developing policies and processes aimed at addressing the current situation. At the very least they should complete the recruitment and promotion processes already in train; consider COVID-19 as a contextual factor in future recruitment, promotion and research funding competitions; and create funding allocations to compensate for its impact on women’s research output (e.g., buying out women’s administrative and pastoral care activities in HEIs and freeing up time for research) as an indicator of their commitment to gender equality (ERAC SWG GRI 2020; HEA 2020b).

6. Summary and Conclusions

Addressing gender inequality has been a focus of attention in Irish HE for over 35 years. The patterns in Irish HEIs are not atypical, but they are unacceptable in terms of research innovation, economic growth, social justice and future sustainability. There appear to be particular barriers to women occupying positions of formal power, whether as full academic professors or in management positions. In this article we outlined the extent and nature of the state interventions that have occurred, focusing particularly on the period since 2014, i.e., the introduction of Athena SWAN, the HEA (2016) and TF (2018) reports, the SALL, initiatives taken by research funding agencies, and those around sexual harassment. In evaluating their impact, we looked at the gender pay gap, the gender profile of the professoriate and senior management as well as other indicators of structural and cultural change. These indicators move beyond looking at an increased awareness of gender inequality to looking at the extent to which change has actually occurred. In doing this it is recognized that it can be argued that it is too soon to discern such an impact. In that context it is critical that such indicators

are monitored externally on an annual basis and that HEI performance in these terms continue to be linked to state funding.

The focus on multiple stakeholders has facilitated looking at gender inequality nationally from several angles, ranging from gender parity in terms of women's occupancy of senior academic and management positions to tackling the sexual harassment of students and staff. Many of these initiatives have been relatively recent and have yet to be fully evaluated. It is difficult to identify exactly what causes structural or cultural change. The development of global indicators of cultural change in HEIs are needed so that progress can be more effectively assessed and benchmarked.

There is no systematic national data on the gender pay gap in Irish HEIs. Change since 2014 has been steady but not spectacular in the gender profile of the professoriate. Men still occupy 74 per cent of professorial positions (HEA 2020a). Men's average "chances" are much higher than women's and vary much less than women's between HEIs. This strongly suggests that women's under-representation cannot be simply explained in terms of maternity, childcare responsibilities, lack of ambition/confidence etc. The pace of change varies between HEIs, suggesting that local structure, culture and leadership play an important role.

Up until 2020 there has never been a woman president of an Irish public university. Five of the universities have at least 40 per cent women on EM as compared with 0 in 2016. The SALI involving a total of 45 posts (less than ten per cent of the total number of professorial posts) is important symbolically. Whether or not it will transform HEIs depends on the appetite of the current leadership (predominantly male) to facilitate substantial change and the continued importance attached to achieving this by the HEA and its parent department.

Many HEIs seem to be pinning their hopes of change exclusively on AS. Evidence from the UK suggests that although AS opens up discussions about gender inequality and although it is seen as positive by participants, especially men, in and of itself, it is unlikely to increase the proportion of women in senior academic positions, if gendered micropolitical practices remain largely intact. To date there is no evidence of the state's attempt to encourage bystander intervention to call out the latter practices. A focus on bystander intervention has only been evident in the case of sexual harassment, where it is arguably going to be most useful in challenging student/student harassment. Up until now it is unlikely that calling out the behavior of senior academics or managers would have been effective, not least because to do so would have negatively impacted on the careers of those doing it. In such a context, gender competent senior leadership is required to lead cultural change, to support survivors and to legitimate whistleblowing.

This article is based entirely on secondary data relating to state interventions and their impact. As such, it has limitations. The absence of intersectional analysis reflects the absence of national data on race/ethnicity. In addition, there is no national data available on the length of time taken by men and women to move from first permanent contract to full professorship; nor indeed on the time taken from completed PhD to that first permanent contract and the extent to which this varies by discipline. It is notable that no attempt has been made to update Ruane and Dobson (1990) work on the gender pay gap at any stage over the past 30 years. Such research could now usefully use models such as Brower and James (2020). Given the apparent reliance by HEIs on AS as the main driver of change, it is crucial that research is undertaken on its impact on measurable indicators. That research might also look at the extent to which AS has ensured that "normal" practices and procedures, which perpetuate gender inequality, have been eliminated. There is also a need for case studies of HEIs that exemplify examples of best practice in terms of gender parity and/or other indicators of structural or cultural change.

The Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality in the HEA has a key role to play in helping to offset the globally recognized gendered impact of COVID 19 on women's research output and ultimately on their careers. A targeted fund set up by the Centre to buy-out service activities such as course administration and pastoral care (academic citizenship work predominantly done by women, and which is undervalued and unlikely to lead to promotion: Sümer et al. 2020) could free up time for research for

those who have been impacted. Indeed, Macfarlane and Burg (2018) recommended that reward and recognition criteria for professors place more emphasis on such academic citizenship in determining professorial pay. This however would require a re-evaluation of the nature and purpose of HEIs—and particularly a re-evaluation of the impact of neoliberalist and managerialist processes on them. To a degree which has not yet been fully appreciated by the state and the leaders of HEIs, these organizations have been created overwhelmingly by male elites, with taken-for-granted masculinist priorities and perspectives. Typically embodying culturally valued contemporary hegemonic masculinities, these organizations will require a re-envisioning if gender equality is to exist.

The Irish approach illustrates the importance of tackling gender inequality on several fronts. It is clear that state interventions (macro) have heightened HEIs' awareness of gender equality. It is less clear that they have actually impacted on the masculinist organizational structure and culture of HEIs (meso) or on the situational micropolitical practices (micro) that effectively perpetuate male advantage and legitimize it.

It is necessary to go beyond just creating a discourse which recognizes that gender inequality exists. The best possibility of leveraging change arises when measures to promote gender equality are driven at the state (macro); the HEI (meso); and the situational (micro) level simultaneously. Linking state funding to indicators of structural and/or cultural change will help to encourage the use of effective tools to tackle different aspects of gender equality. However, unless there are gender competent HEI leaders at every level willing to tackle the historically male dominated, masculinist structure and culture of HEIs, "normal" criteria, procedures, processes and practices will ensure that the pace of change remains glacial. Such gender competent leaders did not exist in Irish HEIs ten years ago (O'Connor 2020a). It remains to be seen if they exist now or whether they are content to simply put "lipstick on the gorilla" (Saunderson 2002).

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