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Envisioning the Future of Higher Education: Expectations, Opportunities and Challenges for Leadership

Report on the Roundtable Session:

“Enhancing and Diversifying Leadership in European Universities”

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The publication of the *SHE Figures 2021* brought some positive but also mixed messages for the leadership of universities across the EU. Despite the introduction of measures to improve women’s participation in decision-making, since 2012, the under-representation of women remains a serious issue and hinders the growth of the European Research Area: “in 2018, women represented more than 40% of academic staff. However, there were considerable differences by grade. While women represented nearly half of grade C and D staff (46.6% of grade C staff and 47.1% of grade D staff) and more than 40% of grade B staff (40.3%), they only occupied around a quarter of grade A staff positions (26.2%) – equivalent to full professorship”.

The European Commission’s *Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* emphasises the importance of inclusive and diverse leadership to bring forward new ideas and innovative approaches in the EU. However, the proportion of women as heads of institutions in the EU’s higher education sector in 2019 stood at only 23.6% (2.4% higher than the proportion in 2016). While the presence of women among the heads of higher education institutions improved at European level, the situation was more mixed at country level. In 2019, the countries with the highest proportions of women among heads of higher education institutions were Latvia (44.4%), Sweden (41.7%), Iceland (40.0%), Lithuania (39.0%), and Belgium (37.0%), while the lowest proportions of women among heads of higher education institutions were in Cyprus (9.1%), Romania (11.1%), France (12.1%), Greece (16.0%), Czechia and Hungary (17.2% each). Most countries had improved between 2016 and 2019 but the proportion of women heads of institutions declined in Malta from 38.5% to 29.3%, Norway from 36.1% to 25.8% and Croatia from 30.8% to 26.5%.

EWORA Vice Rector Panellists were asked to address the following major questions relating to the career paths to leadership:

- **Can women really have it all - when they are still regarded as the primary care providers?**
- **Obstacles to leadership - is Vice Rectorship a dead end or pathway to the Rectorate?**
- **Future challenges for University leaders – Can women leaders make a difference?**

Caring, family and Work-Life Balance

Panellists were asked: “Is parenting/caring still an obstacle to attaining leadership positions in Universities? If so, what could university leaders do to help reconcile leadership with caring/work-life balance?”

This elicited some mixed responses. Referring to the ‘bad mother’ label reserved for female, but **not** male, academics and leaders (most notably in Germany and Austria), there was a consensus that double standards still exist. Since family-related responsibilities still fall too readily to women academics the obvious response should be to advocate/avail of flexible working arrangements, including job-sharing or working part-time. However, this can be a double bind that limits the potential to be a dual role model. Academic careers require mobility (which can be a challenge for couples/parents) and working ‘core hours’ are not conducive to demonstrating leadership or even leadership potential. Clearly, pregnancy remains an obstacle to career progression and can be a major problem for Research Group leaders when one (or several) team members go on maternity leave. Another consequence for women is that, due to family engagement, they come to leadership roles later in life which may impede their progress and potential, even in Sweden.

Panellists were asked: “Are women discouraged (by men and women) from striving for leadership roles? If yes, why is this the case and how can it be mitigated?”

Across the panel there were differing degrees of agreement. It was noted that while women are not actively discouraged, there may be a ceiling (of Vice Rector) placed on their leadership aspirations. It is believed that women get ‘slotted’ into roles such as gender equality/work-life balance. Conversely, it is recognised that women can encourage and boost each other through groups/networks (such as EWORA): “how to best use each other?”. One panellist had run (unsuccessfully) for Rectorship and learned, too late, that it was necessary to lobby one-to-one to get the necessary support. Another panellist mentioned that the ‘old boys network’ is still active – which can constrain the positive contributions of women. Internal discouragement can come from being forced to address the trade-off between leadership/research and teaching. Women seem to disproportionately fear the loss of their research track record if they adopt leadership positions, especially early in their careers. It was claimed that there needs to be a pyramid of women leadership at different levels: family, unit/discipline and institution.

Panellists were asked: “Is there a role/necessity for leadership training/capacity building to encourage more diversity in leadership positions in universities? If so, what form should this take (e.g. mixed-gender training or women-only, tailored mentoring programmes)?”

It was generally agreed that training is necessary and should be resourced but should not be limited to promoting diversity. Furthermore, Gender Equality Plans already include provisions for training and mentoring. Experience in TU Wien started with women-only training which was considered controversial. It then shifted to mixed gender training. There was some opposition to the use of external providers in capacity building in favour of pro-created leadership programmes. Panellist favoured a gender diversity training package for delivery to staff and students

Panellists were asked: “What are the challenges ahead and how can university leaders steer their institutions towards gender-sensitivity in such perilous times?”

There were a number of challenges that emerged: implementing Gender Equality Plans; post-pandemic changes; the war in Ukraine, particularly for Poland and Austria that share a border or are in close proximity. Others referred to the 'whole world' co-created vision that could lead to a backlash against women. In an academic context this could bring about a 'feminisation' of academia with adverse consequences such as a fall in academic salaries. It was agreed that there is a leadership crisis and domestic overload puts women at a disadvantage to be a perfect leader/mum etc.

Panellists were asked: "Should the achievement of gender equality/diversity and inclusion be included in university rankings as a key indicator?"

There was unanimous support for including this in university rankings, but with some reservations – how would it be measured/comparability issues etc. The availability (or lack of it) to promote gender equality in academia through financial rewards/sanctions (which has been introduced in Irish HEIs) could be more effective, especially in the long term.

In conclusion, the current state of post-COVID flux poses multiple challenges but also an opportunity for women to enter and progress into university leadership positions, particularly with the underpinning of Gender Equality Plans in place (including capacity building programmes) and the strengthening of women's leadership networks to provide mutual mentoring and support/encouragement. Against this is the societal allocation of care as women's work which still permeates university careers. In addition, the myth of Vice Rectorship as a new version of the glass ceiling needs to be challenged to see a more gender diverse leadership in academia.

Other Questions for future discussion by EWORA members:

- Could EWORA facilitate formal opportunities for mentoring/coaching for future leaders?
- What forms of leadership capacity building could be developed/expanded to support a cadre of future potential women university leaders?
- How can women Rectors and Vice-Rectors help staff towards work/life balance thereby reducing work/family conflict?
- How should gender equality indicator(s) be incorporated into international university rankings?

EWORA would like to thank to the panellists who contributed to this session;

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Prof. Heidi Hansson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Umeå University

Prof. Katrin Niglas, Vice-Rector, Tallinn University

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