

Gender and advancement in higher education's prestige economy



*What does it take to climb the career ladder in UK academia? And who gets to the top? **Camille B. Kandiko Howson** reports on research that highlights the role of prestige and “indicators of esteem” in hiring and promotion decisions. Prestige is found to be a gendered concept, with the indicators of esteem – publication rates, first author status, keynote invitations – being more easily acquired by men. Meanwhile, the work that motivates many women in academia, such as group success in a research lab or delivering quality teaching programmes, is often ignored or undervalued. Broader aspects of academic work should be recognised to allow for a greater variety of indicators to support diversity and inclusion within the sector.*

Who gets ahead in academia? What does it take to make it to the top? And why, despite decades of research, do UK universities continue to have serious inequalities around gender, race, and other aspects of diversity within leadership positions?

To explore these questions, our research team has undertaken a number of in-depth qualitative research studies to uncover the experiences of individuals on their way up and at the top of the career ladder. Here we report on aspects of career progression and advancement drawing primarily on two studies: [one](#) of 30 mid-career academic women at universities in London; and another [project](#) with 30 senior professional leaders in the UK higher education sector, including seven women.

Prestige in academia

[Research](#) on motivation of academics in higher education has highlighted the role of prestige in hiring and promotion decisions. Drawing on the work of [James English](#), we use the term “prestige economy” to describe the collection of beliefs, values, and behaviours that characterise and express what a group of people prizes highly. For academics, these can be categorised into individual “indicators of esteem”, such as publication rates, first author status, and keynote invitations that are necessary “currency” for advancement. Our [research](#) showed that prestige is a gendered concept, and that women generally feel that the indicators of esteem used by institutions for hiring and promotion are more easily acquired by men.

Following this research with academics we noticed that senior decision-makers within institutions, including those who set the guidelines and run processes for advancement and progression, included senior professional leaders (e.g. registrars, chief operating officers and secretaries). We wanted to further explore this notion of prestige with leaders of professional services — what do they value, what do they value in others, and what “currency” do they consider important for career progression? And why do these pathways seem easier to navigate for some groups of people than for others?



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Academic women and career planning

While focusing primarily on gender, we were also interested in the role of individual characteristics in career progression. Therefore we used the feminist lens of intersectionality which considers multiple forms of identity. This broader conceptualisation reflects a perspective of universities as highly complex sites where multiple and intersecting spheres of “difference”, including culture, ethnicity, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, and language interact.

We found academic women have multiple and varied approaches to career planning, and tend to take an individualised approach to it. Our evidence suggests that mid-career is a vital stage when women are closely considering their career development and are thinking about promotion and leadership. When speaking about promotion, many interviewees told us that their institutions valued monetary income above all else. However, not all income-related activity was considered prestigious. Research-related income was clearly more prestigious than income from students, and working with undergraduates – who may be seen as the most lucrative group – was widely considered the least prestigious form of teaching. These aspects are clearly gendered, and recognised as such by interviewees:

“Education is women’s work at [name of institution removed] ... That’s not what serious academics do around here. Serious academics do other things. They don’t really do teaching... It’s definitely prized here, but it is women’s work.”

In this way, the prestige economy operates to reward certain forms of labour while ignoring or undervaluing others. Several women mentioned that their achievements were not always noticed in their institution. It is often assumed that the lack of value given to the achievements of women and people from ethnic minorities relates to a lack of self-promotion. Our research confirmed other research that suggests a cultural and gendered reluctance to focus on and aggrandise individual activities.

It was clear that many women found it frustrating that the types of things that motivated them in their work — group success in a research lab and delivering quality teaching programmes — were the things least likely to receive recognition and reward. Women sometimes had very ambivalent feelings about prestige and reward, especially if they were able to accrue it while wanting to downplay its importance.

Senior professional leaders and career planning

We used the lens of prestige when exploring career trajectories of senior professional leaders, however the term “credibility” was more comfortable for the majority of interviewees. One of the key themes to emerge is that credibility comes through an ability to see the “big picture” (the whole institution and beyond) and to “get things done”. Often, participants described how they accrued, over time, recognition for having solved particularly intractable problems.

Another expressed a similar view, explaining that the most important aspect of the job is to work for the good of the whole enterprise, and she downplayed the importance of individual achievement: “If you’re part of a successful machine, you’re part of a successful machine”. This view of working for the institution is in quite stark contrast with the individualistic nature of academic careers.

What is valued, and why it matters

Through analysing the role of prestige and gender across these projects we found differences in what is valued in routes of progression and promotion. Senior professional leaders felt more rewarded for playing a role in the delivery of institutional objectives, whereas academics felt less recognition for collective endeavours, such as managing a research team or running teaching programmes.

This research highlights the need for leaders of institutions to ensure that indicators of esteem for collective academic work are developed and rewarded. Academic success should not come down to who shouts loudest about their work. Furthermore, notions of prestige and credibility have to be made more transparent, and broader aspects of academic work should be recognised to allow for a greater variety of indicators to support diversity and inclusion within the sector.

The launch event for the report, “Senior Professional Leaders in Higher Education: The Role of Prestige”, takes place later today from 5:30pm–7pm at King’s College London. You can register [here](#). The full project report is available for download from the [Society for Research into Higher Education](#) website.

*This blog post is based on the author’s co-written article “[Mid-career academic women and the prestige economy](#)” published in *Higher Education Research & Development* (DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2017.1411337).*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

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