

RESEARCH REPORT

VACANCIES AT THE TOP: WHAT ARE THE CHANCES FOR WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UK?

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Women are underrepresented in management in higher education (HE) in many countries. This small-scale study examined the way in which the recruitment and selection of staff for senior management (vice-chancellor, registrar and the accompanying deputy) positions in higher education in the UK contributed to the under representation of women in senior positions. The UK was chosen as the focus of study primarily because the author (a South African policy researcher) was studying there and noted that women occupied few very senior positions in management in higher education (Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, 1999).

The study (Smit, 1998) looked at recruitment and selection practices for senior management appointments in higher education. The focus was on the pre-appointment phase of filling vacant positions, i.e. the advertisement of positions and preliminary selection of candidates.

Data consisted of advertisements, person and job specifications, and recruitment and selection procedures published in UK newspapers. These were analyzed to build up a picture of the kind of person institutions were looking for when trying to fill vacant senior positions. The message(s) sent out by advertisements for senior management appointments were distilled. In addition nine employees in HE were interviewed to establish perceptions of the representation of women in senior management in higher education in the UK and the recruitment and selection processes for senior management appointments.

The data collected highlighted the fact that women were under-represented at senior levels in HE. Possible reasons advanced for this included the masculine character of academia, the nature of qualifications and experience required, selection procedures and criteria used, subjectivity in the recruitment and selection process. The perceptions of recruitment consultants with regard to dual career families were also cited as barriers to equality in recruitment and selection processes.

The language used in the advertisements showed how a specific person was wanted. Advertisements and person specifications often used terminology

from the world of sport. The phrase “track record” was used quite frequently. The practice of calling for nominations conjured up images associated with sport, seemed reminiscent of the glamorous “sportsman (sic) of the year” events: the winner with his trophy on the podium. It also reminds one of the “old boys’ club” and its associated networks; one has to be connected in the world of sport to be nominated for the winners’ trophy. It could be argued that the frequent reference to sport is an indication of the preference for masculine virtues or even men in management.

A picture of the ideal sort of candidates for vacant senior positions also emerged from the study: strong people, very competitive, successful scholars, recognised researchers with long records of publications to their names, well connected in the national and international HE sector, high achievers.

The study highlighted the need for initiatives to enhance the chances for women to advance to senior management levels and to institutionalise good practice in the recruitment and selection of senior managers. Recruitment selection processes should not exclude possible applicants because of the way person specifications were framed.

REFERENCES

Smit, P. (1998). *Vacancies at the top: What are the chances for women in higher education in the UK?* M.A. Dissertation, Institute of Education, University of London.

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PATRICIA SMIT a coordonné le projet Tertiary Education Linkages (programme national de renforcement des capacités dans les 17 établissements qui accueillent traditionnellement des étudiants de race noire) à l’University of the Western Cape. Auparavant, elle a été travailleuse sociale et éducatrice dans les provinces de l’Ouest et de l’Est du Cap. Elle est actuellement étudiante en recherche et explore la signification accordée par les cadres intermédiaires et supérieurs au leadership dans l’enseignement supérieur en Afrique du Sud.