

Women Leaders in Irish Higher Education

Reflections on recent progress and the challenges of sustaining it



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This short article reflects on recent and current women leaders in Irish higher education, as we mark the end of the first year in post of the first woman president of an Irish university and the coming into post this year of three more. It also flags some of the challenges yet to be met and the vigilance required to maintain the progress made on gender equality in the sector over the past several years.

Introduction

It seems apt to be writing this short article on female leadership in the higher education (HE) sector as we draw towards the end of the first year in post of the first woman appointed as president in an Irish university. Prof. Kerstin Mey was appointed interim president of the University of Limerick (UL) in July 2020. It is also an appropriate moment to mark the appointment of Prof. Maggie Cusack as the first president of the newly created Munster Technological University; the commencement in post of Prof. Linda Doyle, the first woman provost of Trinity College Dublin; and the appointment of Prof. Eeva Leinonen, who took up the post of president of Maynooth University in October 2021.

Moving, finally, from one of the few countries in Europe never to have appointed a woman as president of a university, it is positive to see the progress that now gives us four women university leaders out of ten. It should be acknowledged that the institutes of technology have embraced women presidents well before any of our universities; the percentage here, however, has remained modest, at 18% as of December 2020 (HEA, 2021).

Leadership

I have had the privilege to lead in a variety of roles over my career, in both healthcare and education. In Irish HE I was the first woman appointed as full professor and head of school in Dublin City University (DCU), and the first woman – and only person to date – to hold the combined role of deputy president and registrar in DCU. I also held the first vice presidency for equality and diversity in the Irish HE sector, a role from which I retired this year. None of these roles would have been possible had my husband not supported me by becoming the main carer for our two children.

Leadership, in my view, means providing the vision, resources, models, and other supports required to enable and empower one's team to deliver and achieve to the best of their capacity. An effective

leader must engage actively, humanely, courageously, respectfully, and humbly with all relevant stakeholders. Leadership also requires enthusiasm, energy, and active personal delivery of key aspects of the agenda.

In Irish HE, while it almost defies belief that it has taken 428 years to appoint a woman as president of one of our universities, it is heartening to see that Kerstin Mey's appointment in UL last year is not a once-off event. However, ensuring a sustainable cohort of senior women across our higher-education system who have the opportunities to move into professorships or senior leadership roles will require planning, nurturing, and robust monitoring on an ongoing basis.

Professors Kerstin Mey, Maggie Cusack, Linda Doyle, and Eeva Leinonen may have finally broken through this particular Irish 'glass ceiling', but it is important that we not be deluded, by the presence of these four leading lights, into believing that we have, as a sector, solved our gender equality and gendered leadership problems.

Women leading in higher education

One does not have to be a university or institute president to lead in higher education. However, in order to lead effectively, one needs vision and the ability to inspire, build confidence in, and enable a realisation of that vision – often while working through significant challenges. Equality of opportunity for women in higher education, including opportunities to access senior academic and leadership roles, has emerged as a significant challenge and opportunity for leadership in Irish HE over the past decade or so.

NUI Galway became 'first mover' on this agenda. Impelled to act, in light of the painful and damaging fallout generated by the loss of the Sheehy Skeffington gender equality case in 2014, NUI Galway appointed Prof. Jane Grimson, former vice provost of Trinity College, to chair a task force in gender equality, which reported in May 2016. Its 24 recommendations included the appointment of the first vice president of equality and diversity in the Irish HE system – only the second such post in Europe – to ensure that the task force recommendations would be implemented.

The Grimson report, as it is known locally, provided the blueprint for the first two gender-equality action plans implemented in NUI Galway, taking us to autumn 2021 (Grimson et al., 2016). Jane Grimson's leadership of the task force, and the excellent report produced, have had a profoundly positive effect, both directly and indirectly, on the experience of women in NUI Galway.

Dr Máire Geoghegan-Quinn consulted widely as she chaired and finalised the HEA (Higher Education Authority) Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions published in June 2016 (HEA, 2016). This later review produced recommendations not only for Irish higher education institutions (HEIs), many of which mirrored those in the Grimson report, but also for the HEA itself, for research funding bodies, and for the Department of Education and Skills. The implementation of its recommendations has impacted positively on the environment and opportunities for women across the Irish HE sector.

In February 2021, as part of institutional renewal of the Athena SWAN Bronze award, colleagues in NUI Galway were polled on perceived changes in opportunities for women over the past four years: see Figure 1.

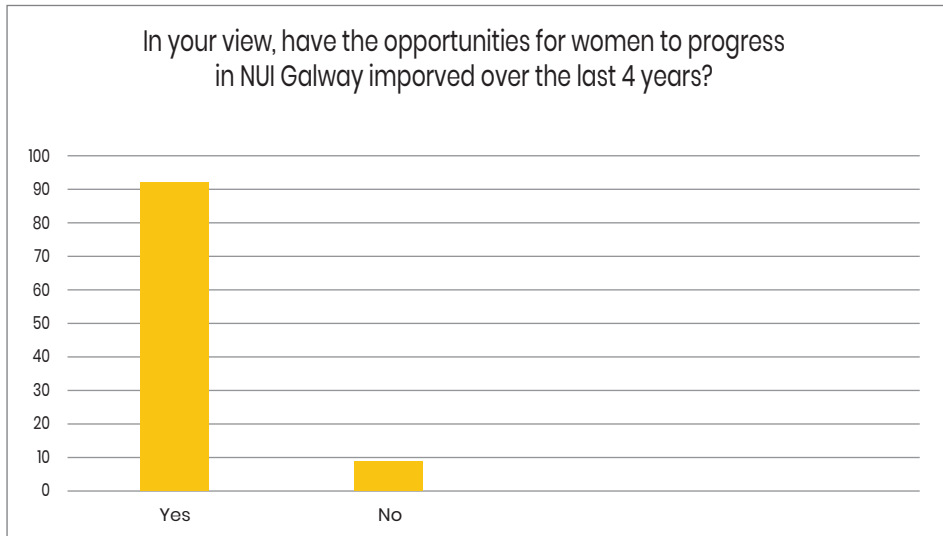


Figure 1: Response to question on opportunities for women – Town Hall Interactive Poll

It is now established policy and practice in NUI Galway, and in many of our HEIs, that all committees, working groups, boards, and panels at all levels in the university comprise at least 40% men and 40% women. This is key for the visibility and role modelling of women in Irish higher education, just as it is key for gaining the types of experience required for access to promotion, management, and leadership opportunities.

NUI Galway promotions and recruitment campaigns since 2016 have improved the proportion of women at senior lecturer grade from 33% to 46%, and at the personal professor grade from 16% to 28%. Overall, women currently represent 23.7% of the professoriate, up from 15% in 2016. See Figure 2.

Commitment and sustainability

This progress has all taken committed leadership, and much of the agenda has been led by women – both in our HEIs and sectorally. As we have seen, for example, the 2016 HEA review was led by Dr Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, and in 2018 Minister Mitchell O'Connor instituted the Gender Equality Action Plan, inclusive of the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative posts, thus keeping gender equality and the dearth of women in senior and leadership positions on the HEA agenda (Flynn & Ryan, 2020). It has also taken commitment from both institutional and departmental leadership teams – men and women.

This leadership and commitment must continue if progress to date is to increase and become sustainable. International evidence and experience on the ground indicate that without continuing leadership, monitoring, and holding key actors to account, we quickly revert to type, and the gains made

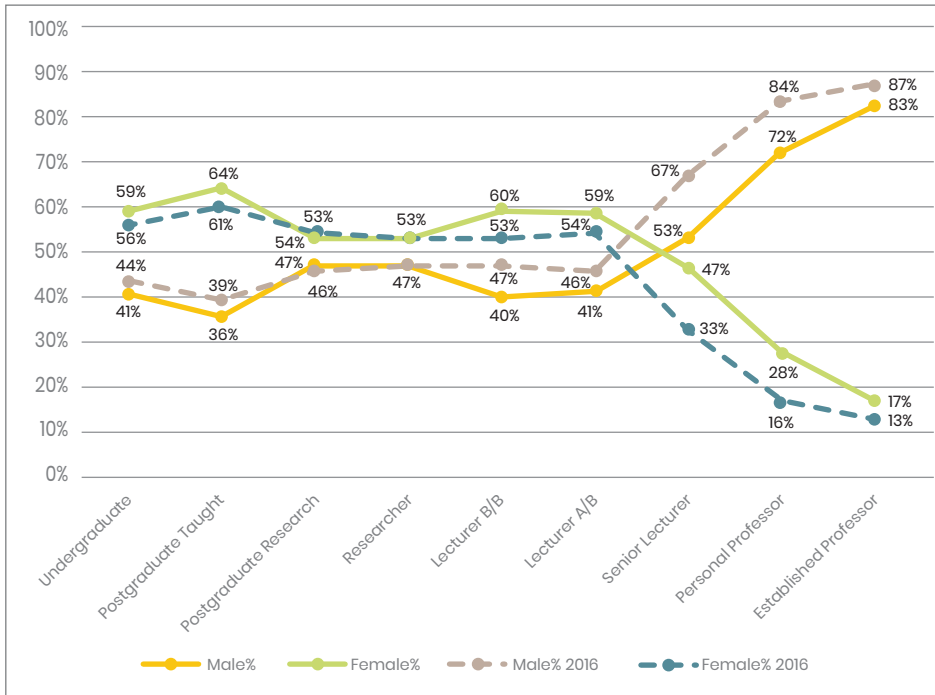


Figure 2: Academic career pipeline of all staff and students (2016 dashed line, 2020 solid line)

on gender equality can unravel rapidly. Hence the increasing concern, internationally, about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women in the workforce and on progress on gender equality in general.

Covid-19 has presented extraordinary challenges for colleagues – particularly those with caring responsibilities – across higher education and many other sectors. In the NUI Galway Covid-19 staff survey in June 2020, more female (47%) than male academics (31%) ranked caring responsibilities as their top challenge.

In light of this reality, research on the impact of caring on careers in HE, particularly women's careers, and my own experience of leadership roles in Irish HE, it behoves leaders in Irish HE to consider in some depth whether we wish to continue with the model of 'careless institutions' (Lynch, 2010). Their conclusions will have profound impacts on the future careers of women in Irish higher education, including the ability of women to gain and function in leadership roles in the sector. Refusing to engage in such consideration will have an equally profound effect.

Leaders of the Irish higher education sector were, until this decade, apparently completely oblivious to structural inequalities and to the exclusion and squandering of the leadership potential of up to 50% of its population across the diverse range of activities and services provided by the sector. Such an approach to the future leadership of a sector, where approximately 60% of the student body and over 50% of staff are women, is neither morally acceptable nor sustainable if the sector is to continue to flourish through this century.

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Four female leading lights in Higher Education



Professor Kerstin Mey
President of University of Limerick



Professor Maggie Cusack
President of Munster Technological University



Professor Eeva Leinonen
President of Maynooth University



Professor Linda Doyle
President and Provost of
Trinity College Dublin