

The Looking Glass: How Irish Female Professors Perceive Their Informal Leadership Roles

Our study explores the perspectives of female professors in Irish business schools, emphasising their crucial informal leadership roles. These professors, having risen through the academic ranks, become role models for junior female academics. The study shows they feel a deep responsibility to mentor younger academics, especially women, and to challenge and change established norms in academia. They not only support their mentees but also actively work towards creating a more inclusive and gender-balanced academic environment.

Insights from female professors

Demographic diversity among senior academics, though improving, remains a challenge in Ireland. One highlighted difference between genders is that female professors tend to use informal and distributed forms of leadership more than their male counterparts. The subtle guidance and influence of this form of leadership have the potential to encourage other women to pursue senior roles, ultimately enhancing diversity and inclusion in professorial communities.

To fully comprehend the breadth and depth of this transformative influence, it is imperative to delve into the perceptions that Irish female professors have about their informal leadership roles. In our study, we captured the perspectives of 13 full professors from university business schools in Ireland. We found that their experiences as they moved up the ranks of academia greatly influenced their leadership beliefs and what they felt was important as leaders. The findings offer insight into the intrinsic values motivating the professors' activities and the profound implications of informal leadership, as perceived by these participants.



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Having reached the professoriate, participants suddenly found themselves embodying the aspirations of junior female academics. They were seen as role models and beacons of hope that it is possible to reach this pinnacle as a female academic. Women expressed admiration, creating an unexpected duty as informal role model. One of the professors recounted her experience:

I remember at the time people saying, 'I don't think you realise the significance people attached to your gender.' The number of women that wrote to me and just said, 'We never thought we'd see this because it's like 30 years and there's never been a woman in that job.' You don't sign up to be a role model of any kind, but just because you occupy a role, that then happens or shows people what's possible.

From this elevated stance, participants began to realise the significant influence they held. They recognised the opportunity and the imperative to enact positive change. They felt a profound responsibility to advocate for and support other women traversing the paths they once navigated, using their experiences and influence to pave the way for the success of other women. The recognition of this power to effect meaningful change brought with it a deep-seated commitment to actively champion the advancement and empowerment of women in academia. As one participant said, 'My role as a professor is to support other colleagues; I really see that as kind of the basis of what I do.'

Our findings reveal that nearly every professor perceived the nurturing and mentoring of less-experienced academics, particularly women, as their paramount responsibility in their roles as professors and leaders. Their motivations appear to have partly originated in their knowledge of women's disadvantage in career advancement compared to men. Based on their experience, participants sought to mentor others, in an attempt to 'level the playing field'. One professor said mentoring was 'critically important, particularly if you're female'. When asked why women in particular, she responded: 'Because our opportunities haven't been as great as for men; the figures are there to show it, and I think the men very often look after themselves.'

These professors view their informal leadership efforts as a vital support system, enabling junior faculty members to navigate the academic landscape, overcome challenges, and achieve their full potential. The interaction and connection, developed through mentorship, are seen as enriching, fostering personal and professional growth for both mentors and mentees.

Challenging the status quo

As many female professors are acutely aware of the difficulties and biases present in academia, they see their informal leadership role as essential not

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only in helping others navigate these intricate landscapes but also in reshaping the very landscape that perpetuates inequality and hinders progress for women. They believe in the importance of questioning established norms, addressing gender disparities, and promoting systemic changes to create a more equitable academic landscape. One professor illustrates this point:

I was talking about my family and that I find night-time work very difficult because of two small kids at home. Surprisingly, a male colleague said to me, 'I'll give you advice never to mention your kids again, because such and such a professor comes in here every Saturday; obviously they wouldn't take well to you talking about your kids and how that impacts your work.' I did follow his advice for a long time, and sort of almost made people forget that I had three kids at home. But since, I've sort of grown out of that kind of complex. I mentioned my kids at every point because I want to encourage others to do the same, because they're just a fact of life, you know, and women work harder because they have kids.

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Female professors' resilience and determination in confronting these challenges exemplify their commitment to fostering positive change in academia. For example, embedding reference to life beyond academic walls encourages those who may be reluctant to apply for more senior roles due to family commitments. By leveraging their experiences and insights in a positive way, female professors endeavour to cultivate an academic environment where diversity is embraced and equitable opportunities are accessible to all, irrespective of gender.

Conclusion

Having reflected on how these extraordinary women lead informally, it is clear that they have a deeply impactful influence in academia. They see themselves as mentors, advocates, change agents, and role models, challenging the gendered nature of academia in favour of a more diverse and equitable academic world.

Acknowledging and better understanding their perceptions and values is crucial in recognising the significant and transformative impact of their leadership approach. It also provides insights into how academia can support and leverage these informal roles for the betterment of the academic community and society at large.