



Setting Agendas on Gender Equality in the Higher Education Sector in Ireland

Getting in but not getting on: Women in top jobs in universities

Short summary of the impact

Third-level institutions in western society are educating an increasingly feminised student body, with female students now outnumbering males. Professor Pat O'Connor's research has highlighted the gap between the increasingly feminised student body and the ongoing masculinisation of senior academic staff/management positions in higher education. O'Connor's work has particularly focused on the scarcity of women in such 'top jobs' in universities, and the factors which have contributed to it. Her research is concerned with the importance of institutional leadership; the gendered construction of what constitutes valued knowledge; issues related to social justice; the contribution of diversity to innovation; and the consequent absence of role models for junior faculty and students. O'Connor's research has set a gender equality agenda in higher education, influenced national/European policy, and informed public debate on this issue.

Underpinning research

In 1975/76, 5% of those at (full) professorial level in Ireland were women; by 1984/85

this had fallen to 2%, although the total proportion of female faculty had risen¹. Motivated by concern with this issue, in 1989 the Higher Educational Authority (HEA) established the Access and Equality Unit in University College Cork to collect data and raise awareness, specifically focusing on gender inequality in higher education.

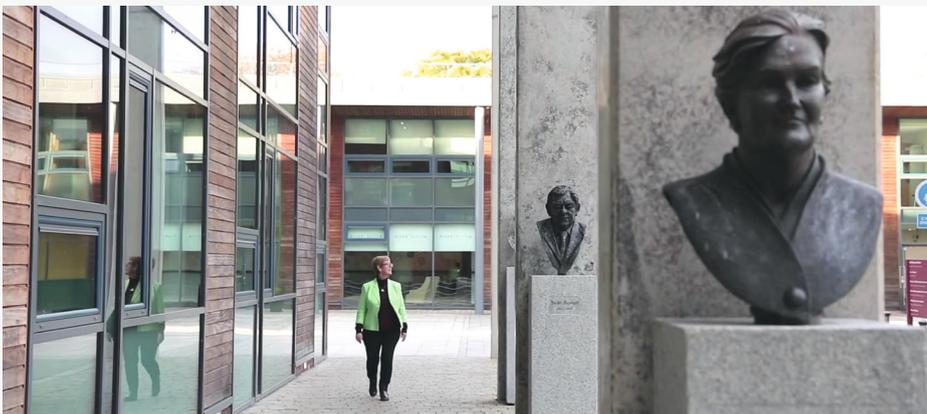
In the 1990s, driven by EU interest in the topic, Ireland created a separate Department of Equality and Law Reform. The 1990s also saw a grass-roots blossoming of Women's Studies as an academic discipline in most Irish universities. O'Connor became the Director of Women's Studies at UL (1992-1997); this developed her awareness of power and of what Frazer (2008) has called the 'misrecognition' of women. The scarcity of cross-national data on the gendering of academic positions led O'Connor to focus particularly on the professoriate. Her work in the area initially focused on documentary analysis: comparing trends over time and between universities. Such comparisons undermined assumptions that the absence of women from these 'top jobs' (Ref 7) reflected childbearing/rearing or women's 'innate' lack of interest or ability in these areas.

O'Connor's tenure as Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (2000-2010) deepened her interest in the research

topic of senior management. During her tenure, the proportion of women at professorial level in that faculty increased from 13% to 43%. Her participation in what became known as the Women in Higher Education Management Network (2007-) culminated in a cross-national study of senior management in higher education in Ireland, UK, Turkey, Portugal, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden. This led to the development of an analytical typology to classify academic organisational cultures in these countries (Ref 6). A number of articles compared and contrasted Irish senior management with those in other countries, particularly Portugal, Australia and Sweden (Refs 4 and 5). O'Connor's book *Management and Gender in Higher Education* (Ref 3) provides an in-depth understanding of senior management in Irish higher education, where gender inequality is of marginal interest to an inward-looking masculinist culture, one where women colleagues are perceived as 'disruptive', irritating and 'frightening'.

In 2012 O'Connor and Professor Ita Richardson, with a cross-European network of colleagues, received EU Framework 7 funding for FESTA: 2012-2017. The project started from the assumption that the under-representation of women in STEM needed to be seen as an organisational or systemic issue, rather than as an individual woman's problem. Support for this position was implicitly provided by variation in the proportion of women in the professoriate in Irish universities in 2013: from 14% (NUI Galway) to 31% (UL) (Table 1).

Interest in best practice was generated by the high proportion of women at professorial level in UL - considerably above the averages for Ireland (19 per cent) and the EU (20 per cent). This interest is reflected in a contract with Palgrave Macmillan for *Gendered Success in Higher Education: Global Perspectives*, edited by Kate White and Pat O'Connor, including



This research is supported by



examples from Austria, Portugal, Sweden, UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Turkey, India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as Ireland.

FESTA publications (co-authored with Dr Clare O'Hagan) include a deconstruction of the gendered nature of excellence as vital to understanding why gender inequalities persist (Ref 1). Recognising the importance of moving beyond a focus on women, another article (Ref 2) puts forward a typology of masculinities in higher education based on career and relational commitment. It suggests that careerist masculinity (embodying strong career and weak relationship commitment) characterises only a small minority of men – particularly those who are interested/engaged in management. The article suggests that assumptions about masculinity inhibit women's (and many men's) access to senior management in universities.

References to the research

- O'Connor, P. and O'Hagan, C. (2015) Excellence in university academic staff evaluation: a problematic reality? *Studies in Higher Education* DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2014.1000292](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.1000292); <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.1000292>
- O'Connor, P. O'Hagan, C and Brannen, J. (2015) 'Exploration of Masculinities in academic organisations: A tentative typology using career and relationship commitment', *Current Sociology* 63 (4):528-546
- O'Connor, P. (2014) *Management and Gender in Higher Education*. Manchester: MUP
- O'Connor, P. and Carvalho, T. (2015) 'Different or similar: constructions of leadership by senior managers in Irish and Portuguese universities', *Studies in Higher Education*, 40 (9) 1679-1693
- O'Connor, P. Carvalho, T. and White, K. (2014) 'The experience of senior positional leaders in Australia, Irish and Portuguese universities: universal or contingent' *Higher Education Research and Development, Special Issue: Leading the Academy: defining the future of Leadership in Higher*

Universities	1993/94**	2001	2004***	2013***
UCD	3%	8%	14%	20%
UCC	18%	6%	11%	16%
NUIG	4%	13%	10%	14%
NUIM	0%	5%	8%	23%
TCD	8%	5%	9%	14%
DCU	0%	0%	4%	17%
UL	0%	3%	9%	31%
Overall	4%	7%	12%	19%

Table 1: Proportion of academic staff at professorial level in Irish public Universities who are women 1993/2013

** Smyth, 1996; *** HEA (2006); ****HEA (2013)

- Education* 33 (1):5-18.
- O'Connor, P. (2011) ['Where do women fit in university senior management? An analytical typology of organisational cultures'](#) in B. Bagilhole and K. White (eds.) *Gender Power and Management: A Cross cultural Analysis of Higher Education*, Palgrave Macmillan pp.168-191
- O'Connor, P. (1998 reprinted 1999) *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration

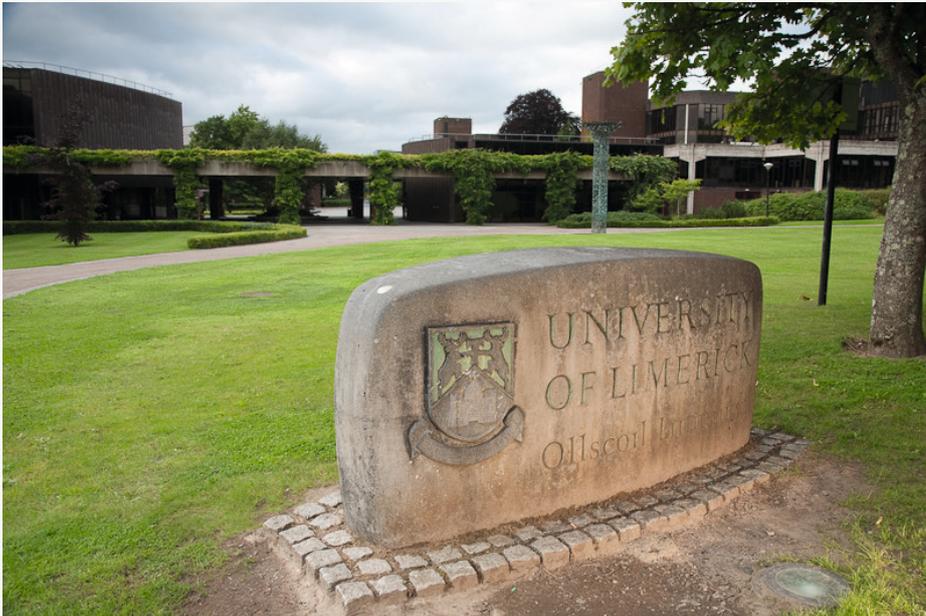
Details of impact

Pat O'Connor's research on gender equality, with a particular focus on women in the professoriate, has impacted on academia, policy makers and the wider public.

Academia

O'Connor's research has had a far-reaching impact in the University of Limerick and in academia nationally and internationally. In November 1996, following an invited presentation to the University of Limerick

Governing Authority, she was asked by the University's then President, to brief him on "the most effective practical steps the university can take within the law to address the matter of recruiting and promoting a greater proportion of females". Since that time she has continued framing the issue in ways that make sense to those in power; collecting and presenting data on women and 'top jobs'; and outlining the strategies which led to the increase in the proportion of women in UL at full professoriate level (from 0% to 34% over a 15 year period). Her own contribution to this development was recognised by UL President Professor Don Barry at the launch of her book *Management and Gender in Higher Education* in April 2014 (Source 1). In March 2014 she was invited by the President of NUI Maynooth to be a keynote speaker on gender inequality in the context of agenda-setting there. He recognised her 'scholarly analysis' 'well-informed by the international context and current theoretical models' (Source 2). O'Connor's research has been widely disseminated to senior academics and administrators not only in these fora but also in UCD, UCC, NUIG and DIT. Internationally, O'Connor



Policy Makers

Beginning in 1996, O'Connor's research began to influence policy making. Through her interactions with the Department of Education and Skills, she influenced the drafting of the Universities Act (1997) (Source 4). She has been recognised as having "raised the bar in relation to gender equality in academia, not least because of her public engagement on these issues" (Source 5) In 1998, she was invited to address the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Women's Rights. In the 2000s, against a backdrop of diminishing state interest in gender equality, O'Connor continued to focus on the proportion of women at (full) professorial level nationally and internationally. Her impact on the science and policy landscape at EU level has also been recognised (Source 6).

From 2004-2012 the Irish Higher Education Authority stopped publishing gender figures on academic staffing in universities. O'Connor lobbied intensively and extensively to get it to deliver on this EU responsibility (Sources 6 and 7) and in 2013 it resumed the practice. In December 2014, in response to media coverage of its published figures on women in senior positions, the HEA issued a press release which referred explicitly to the quantitative results of O'Connor's study, *Management and Gender in Higher Education*, noting that it analysed 'the processes through

was invited to discuss UL's success in increasing the proportion of women in the professoriate at the 2015 Summit of Senior Leaders on Programme Change in Academia in the University of Cambridge. She has presented numerous conference papers on the topic at other international fora as well as publishing extensively on it in national and international peer-reviewed journals. In July 2015 she was invited by the CEO of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to be one of a five-member panel to review Gender Equality in Higher Education in Ireland.

In the early 1990s, O'Connor was part of a network of feminist academics whose mutual support ensured that a fixed-line budget for Women's Studies was provided to Irish universities by the HEA. This collaboration continues: O'Connor and her FESTA colleagues supported the development of a set of recommendations for gender equality in Higher Education by INNOVATE in UCC (November 2012), and the work of INTEGER at TCD in extending Athena SWAN to all Irish public universities (2014).

In 2007, O'Connor was one of the founding members of WHEM (Women in Higher Education Management), a network of women in academia focused on promoting gender equality. O'Connor is the only Irish academic in the group, whose cross-national studies have influenced thinking

on gender equality internationally. As a member (2013-2014) of the three-person evaluation team for Nordic Spaces, a large umbrella programme funding multidisciplinary cross-national research, O'Connor played a crucial role by highlighting implicit gender bias in the allocation of Scandinavian research funding, particularly the under-representation of female leadership in funded research projects. The report was well-received by the funders, who indicated that it would affect their subsequent funding practices (Source 3).





which institutions of higher education reproduce themselves in gendered terms' (Source 7).

The CEO of the HEA has acknowledged O'Connor's impact in the area of gender equality in academia. In 2014, as a result of O'Connor's influence, the HEA assigned responsibility for gender equality to a member of its senior management team. On May 28th 2015 the CEO of the HEA publicly identified gender as a systemic issue; on 15th June 2015 he referred publicly to O'Connor's work at the INTEGER Symposium on Gender Equality and Structural Change in Higher Education and Research, Dublin. He subsequently acknowledged that in the face of Ireland's lack of effective action on gender equality, O'Connor had made a 'singular' contribution: "Through her publications, public addresses and personal networking she ensured that issues relating to gender, and in particular inequality for female academics and researchers, was never far from policy debates about the future of higher education and research in Ireland". He acknowledged O'Connor's 'powerful combination of scholarship, expertise, experience and commitment' (Source 8).

Public debate

O'Connor's role as a public intellectual has been widely noted (Sources 2, 5 and 6). She has consistently highlighted the issue of women at professoriate level in the media over a 20 year period, through her own research and by funding fellowships for women students in Social Sciences for 13 years. In 2015 she refused to participate in what she saw as an empty exercise relating to gender issues at third level: her refusal was widely covered in the national print media. O'Connor has frequently been referred to in the media and in Dáil reports as a gender equality expert (Sources 9 and 10).

Gender inequality is a difficult and important problem that goes beyond the scarcity of role models and mentors for women in academia. Universities determine what knowledge is valued. O'Connor's consistent focus on changing cultures and policies has raised awareness of gender inequality in ways that will not only increase



opportunities for women in academia, but also reframe the nature of valued knowledge and promote innovation.

Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Address by Prof Don Barry, President of University of Limerick.
2. Written testimonial from Prof Philip Nolan, President of NUI Maynooth.
3. Written testimonial from Goran Blomquist, Managing Director, RJ, Stockholm, commissioner of the evaluation of Nordic Spaces Research Programme
4. Correspondence Minister for Education to Dr Pat O'Connor 22nd Sept 1996
5. Written testimonial from Prof Kathleen Lynch, Professor of Equality Studies, UCD.
6. Written testimonial from Dr Elizabeth Pollitzer, coordinator of FP7 GENSET; convener of Gender Summit.
7. 'Gender and Academic Staff', HEA briefing document on improving gender equality among academic staff in higher education institutions, 3 December 2014.

8. Written testimonial from Tom Boland, CEO of Irish Higher Education Authority.
9. Gender Inequality, Dáil report 10 June 2015 <https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2015-06-10a.120>
10. 'Gender inequality 'a systemic issue in Irish higher education'', The Irish Times, 28 May 2015.

Find out more: Watch the video at www.ul.ie/research



Professor Pat O'Connor
Professor of Sociology
and Social Policy
Department of Sociology
University of Limerick
Pat.oconnor@ul.ie

1. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) published these unsettling statistics in *Women Academics in Ireland: The Report of the Committee on the Position of Women in Third Level Education in Ireland* (1987)