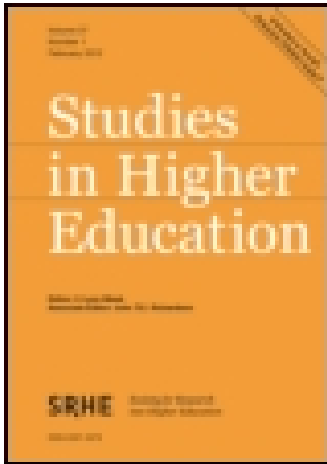


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Excellence in university academic staff evaluation: a problematic reality?

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This article is concerned with the macro-cultural ideal or institutional myth of excellence as defined and used in the evaluation of academic staff as part of an institutional logic. Such logics 'prescribe what constitutes legitimate behaviour and provide taken-for-granted conceptions of what goals are appropriate and what means are legitimate to achieve these goals' as stated by Pache and Santos Insead. In the case study university, this logic is reflected in the identification of ostensibly objective, gender-neutral key performance indicators of excellence. Lamont suggests that evaluation is necessarily subjective. Drawing on 23 qualitative interviews with those involved in such evaluation, this article looks at variation in the definition of excellence and in the evaluative practices in decision-making fora. It raises questions about the implications of this for gender inequality and for the myth of excellence and ultimately for the legitimacy of the organisation.

Keywords: excellence; gender; case study; myth; academic staff evaluation; key performance indicators; university

Introduction

Excellence can be seen as a 'hooray word' (Whyte 2005), an 'idealised cultural construct' (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 342) or a 'macro-cultural myth' (Hallett 2010). It has been widely used to refer to various aspects of universities' activities. Such myths are particularly important in institutions such as universities where 'success depends on legitimacy acquired from conformity to macro-cultural myths' (Hallett 2010, 54; Scott and Meyer 1983). This article is concerned with the macro-cultural ideal or institutional myth of excellence as defined and used in the evaluation of faculty in higher education institutions as part of an institutional logic. Such logics 'prescribe what constitutes legitimate behaviour and provide taken-for-granted conceptions of what goals are appropriate and what means are legitimate to achieve these goals' (Pache and Santos Insead 2013, 973). Universities are currently exposed to pressure for greater accountability (Deem, Hilliard, and Reed 2008). In higher education, this is reflected in an explicit focus on what purport to be objective, gender-neutral, key performance indicators (KPIs) which reflect the myth of excellence.

In the context of institutionalism, and particularly 'inhabited institutionalism' (Hallett 2010), this article explores variation in the ways that excellence is defined

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and implemented by organisational actors. It uses an 'inhabited view' which stresses 'intra-organisational gendered politics' (Hallett 2010, 66) to look at variations in the definition and implementation of excellence. It is suggested that this fails to take into account the subjective and interactional reality of organisational actors, with potential effects on gender inequality; the myth of excellence, and ultimately the legitimacy of the organisation. These ideas are explored in the context of a public university.

Excellence and gender

Various kinds of managerialist processes were identified in the UK from the early 1980s (Deem, Hilliard, and Reed 2008) and began to be evident in Irish universities in the early 1990s (O'Sullivan 2005) and have become particularly obvious in the twenty-first century (Lynch, Gummell, and Devine 2012). In Ireland, there has been increasing control by the state over the universities, reflected in a number of measures including 'compacts' between individual universities and the Higher Educational Authority (HEA) around 'strategic objective indicators of success against which institutional performance will be measured and funding allocated' in the context of its Performance Evaluation Framework for Higher Education (HEA 2013).

Universities can be seen as bureaucratic and hierarchical organisations in Weberian (1947) terms, insofar as access to and movement between positions is purportedly based on gender-neutral objective criteria. Considerable bureaucratic effort is devoted to the creation of what are presented as objective criteria and procedures, with judgement and discretion being implicitly seen as problematic. Such assumptions contrast dramatically with the position adopted by Lamont (2009, 19) since she sees evaluation as 'by necessity a fragile and uncertain endeavour and one that requires "emotion work" if it is to proceed smoothly ... these extra-cognitive elements do not corrupt the process'. Subjectivity is also widely seen as an acceptable practice in peer-review decisions although such subjective assessments sit uneasily with the focus on objective, numerical, purportedly gender-neutral KPIs.

It is increasingly recognised that universities are male-dominated organisations internationally: 'gender inequalities in academia appear to be persistent and global phenomena' (Husu 2001, 172). They are also horizontally segregated in terms of (gendered) disciplines. There is substantial evidence of the difficulties of eliminating gender bias from both objective measures and subjective evaluations (EU 2004; Rees 2011), although increased transparency is helpful (Foschi 1996, 2006). van den Brink and Benschop (2012) demonstrated that both the definition of excellence and the practices involved in its assessment in professorial recruitment were highly gendered. Even where positions are publicly advertised, the expertise required is frequently implicitly or explicitly gendered (Yates 2009; see also EU 2004). Indeed, in the evaluation of research applications even in Sweden, where the state and the Swedish Research Council support the elimination of gender bias, there is evidence for its persistence (Ahlqvist et al. 2013; Husu 2014; Wenneras and Wold 1997).

Organisational structures and processes reflect wider societal structures and cultures. In Irish public universities, roughly four-fifths of those in senior management positions and in the (full) professoriate are men (HEA 2013; O'Connor 2014a). In this context, the criteria and the processes involved in evaluative decision-making involve predominantly male groups, in masculinist structures, using criteria which are more likely to privilege men than women, whether based on their individual characteristics or their discipline. It is increasingly accepted that in most Western Societies,

men and women are differently valued. This has been referred to by Connell (1987) as a patriarchal dividend; by Thorvaldsdottir (2004) as a male bonus; and by Bourdieu (2001, 93) as ‘a negative symbolic co-efficient’ for women. For Ridgeway (2011, 92) ‘gender is at root a status inequality – an inequality between culturally defined types of people’. Thus, stereotypical cultural beliefs do not simply define men and women as different; they implicitly define men as superior to women. Furthermore, this differential valuation extends beyond individual men and women, so that male-dominated organisations or those that reflect and reinforce men’s priorities and lifestyles are most valued (Thornton 2013). In Frazer’s (2008, 58) terms, such contexts are characterised by ‘institutionalised patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one [i.e. women] as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem’. This implicitly raises the issue of the extent to which KPIs, while purporting to be gender-neutral, perpetuate institutionalised patterns that privilege men.

Problematising excellence in a university context raises disturbing questions, not least because of the concept of a university as concerned with the definition and validation of excellence based on demonstrated qualifications and competencies. Building on work by Lamont (2009) on evaluation in multidisciplinary teams and by van den Brink and Benschop (2012) and Grummell, Lynch, and Devine (2009), in relation to appointments, this article examines academic staff’s perception of excellence in a range of evaluative contexts and invites speculation about their implications.

Methodology and description of the study

Case studies provide an opportunity to examine particular contexts in detail. They are not without challenges although they have sometimes been used (e.g. Buzzanell and D’Enbeau 2009; Lewis and Cooper 2005) to emphasise detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events and their relationships. A case study was seen as appropriate to this research since it enables a contextual understanding of the concept of excellence and evaluative practices in that particular context. The study mainly included an empirical, qualitative enquiry, investigating perceptions of excellence, and the perceived practices involved in their implementation in evaluative fora (i.e. hiring, progression and promotion). The case study university is a ‘new university’ having achieved university status in the last century. In it, as in other Irish public universities, an academic hierarchy exists which consists of a number of academic positions arranged hierarchically from entry level five (lecturer), to level one (full professor). Some documentary analysis relating to university and to the wider higher educational context was also undertaken, as part of the case study. Across the Irish public university system as a whole, women now constitute roughly half of those at the lower academic staff levels, but they become less visible as one moves up the academic hierarchy. Thus, although 43% of all academic staff in Irish public universities are women, over four-fifths of those at professoriate (Table 1) and senior management level (O’Connor 2014a) are men.

In the case study university, shaped by global competitive and nation state pressures, evaluative processes identify KPIs of excellence. Thus, depending on the level of the position on the academic hierarchy, between 32 and 46 indicators of excellence have been officially identified, spread across the three areas of research, teaching and service, with a score of 70% being defined as excellent in each area (HR 2012). These indicators include the number and quality of research publications in refereed journals of high national and international repute and impact; the ability to attract

Table 1. Percentage of women at various academic levels in all Irish public universities.

Position	1975/1976 (%)	1983/1984 (%)	1993/1994 (%)	2004 (%)	2012 (%)
Professor	5	1	4	10	19
Associate professor	7	6	6	15	26
Senior lecturer	3	7	12	31	33
Lecturer	12	21	28	43	49
Assistant lecturer	26	24	39	47	49
Total	11	14	20	37	43

Source: O'Connor (2014b).

funding from external peer-reviewed research grant agencies; high-quality teaching and active, sustained service contributions to university, faculty or departmental committees. The purpose of these indicators is to provide decision-makers with objective measures of excellence.

This study was undertaken as part of a larger cross-national project concerned with women's underrepresentation at senior levels in STEM disciplines. Within the larger study, research was undertaken on career trajectories, decision-making, supervision practices and perceptions of excellence, involving 60 respondents in the case study university. The data in this article are drawn from semi-structured, qualitative interviews with a total of 23 respondents (11 men; 12 women). These include a purposive sample of 14 respondents (7 men and 7 women) involved in evaluative activities either as candidates or as board members, and nine respondents (four men and five women) who emerged as candidates in such processes in a random sample study of career trajectories (Table 2). Pseudonyms are used and in the interests of confidentiality, identifying information (such as level or basis for inclusion in the study as candidate or board member is not used). Hence, respondents are only identified as man/woman and by number.

Candidates in the academic selection, promotion and progression processes were asked 'What criteria were used to assess candidates?'; 'Do you think that these criteria signify academic excellence?'; 'Are there other skills or qualities a candidate could possess which would signify academic excellence?' Members of hiring and promotion boards were simply asked 'How do you define academic excellence'? All of those interviewed were academics. Interviews averaged one hour and the interviews were tape recorded. There were no refusals. The concept of excellence and its definition and implementation was an explicit focus of the research. The thematic analysis revealed the complexities of meaning given to excellence. The identification of practices did not drive the research, but emerged as a way of explaining those patterns which emerged from successive readings of the transcripts. The study received ethical approval, with all transcripts being sent to participants for approval after interviewing.

Table 2. Gender, status of respondents and source of sample (*n*).

	Status: candidates	Status: board members	Career trajectory research project	Perceptions of excellence research project
Male	4	7	4	7
Female	7	5	5	7
Total	11	12	9	14

We look first at variation in the definitions of excellence and then at the practices involved in its evaluation.

Variations in the definition of excellence

There was a good deal of ostensible acceptance of the logic of including research, teaching and service in evaluating excellence: ‘They [candidates] have to meet three criteria and I would say the criteria were excellence in research, excellence in teaching and excellence in service’ (woman 1). However, the relationship between the three components and excellence was problematised:

academics should be excellent in research primarily, good teachers or as good as they can be and then do some service. So I don’t think the three criteria represent excellence but you can be excellent in any or all of them. (man 4)

There was confusion about the point at which adequacy became excellence in any one or all of these areas. Furthermore, the necessary balance between the elements in any one area in order to achieve excellence was not clear (e.g. could high levels of research funding offset limited publications or vice versa). Some respondents were very critical of the current processes with their stress on the superficialities of performativity, but these were typically pragmatically accepted. There were occasional references to the past, where selection and promotion were seen as related to one’s ability to leverage ties of loyalty and gratitude from ‘an inner circle of mostly men’ – in the anticipation of ‘pay-offs’ (woman 8).

Among the respondents, there was general agreement that research excellence was particularly important as a criterion. Part of the attraction of research is that it is measurable and appears objective and transparent, reflecting an infatuation with the ‘social construction of number’ (Moss 2013), particularly by those with a science or engineering background.

Excellence is, to my mind, research ... It’s also easier to assess ... Because you have papers, you have [PhD] students, you have funding, you have awards, you have – you know – there is a lot of metrics, and particularly scientists and engineers, but I think everybody, just likes to stick a number on something. And teaching is a much more nebulous sort of thing to assess. And what people tend to do is they will write large briefs about their teaching strategies and ideas. It’s very hard to distinguish between those. (man 2)

The focus on research receives further legitimation from a state concerned with global university rankings and the commercialisation of research by industry. However, man 6 suggested that it was sufficient for elements of the research portfolio to be excellent: ‘I would expect to see a body of work in which there are elements that are excellent. So it’s a portfolio which reaches standards of excellence.’ Man 3 also sees research as a key criterion, but he focuses specifically on publications in ‘good quality journals’, dismissing other potential indicators such as the level of funding received; number of Ph.D. students, etc. as ‘inputs’:

the research has to be research output, it’s not money that you bring in, it’s not, it’s not even so much Ph.D. output, you know, Ph.D. students, it’s got to be in terms of publication in good quality journals. So that you become well known in your field with an established reputation for yourself and you are publishing regularly. (man 3)

Such 'good quality journals' however are not identified, the assumption being that those who are excellent will be able to identify them, reflecting a taken-for-granted assumption of insider knowledge, which has resonances with Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital and which sits uneasily with a focus on objectively defined KPIs. Man 3 goes on to note that in a scarce resource context, the university could not afford full-time research academics who did not teach: 'I'm not really interested in anybody who is just, just a kind of publishing machine you know. ... They have to do their teaching as well'. Thus, although he sees publication in 'good quality journals' and 'becoming well known in your field' as appropriate criteria for excellence, all faculty are expected to be involved in both research and teaching.

In the case study university, citations in the web of science are officially seen as a measure of reputation or status. However, even within the sciences, citation rates favour some disciplines over others (EU 2004; O'Connor 2014a). This was occasionally recognised. However, even within the same discipline, there is evidence that women are likely to receive a lower share of citations than their male counterparts, although other indicators of perceived status may sometimes interact with gender. Thus, for example, in South Africa, foreign male authors are likely to be most highly cited (although gender differences persist when these authors are excluded: Prozesky and Boshoff 2012). The trend that male authors are less likely to cite publications by women, identified by Ferber (1988) persists in more recent studies (e.g. Maliniak, Powers, and Walter 2013; McLaughlin Mitchell, Lange, and Brus 2013). Thus, although references by both male and female authors to publications by women is increasing, gender differences in the citations of male and female authors persist, leading Hakanson (2005, 321) to conclude that such trends could be seen as 'part of the social stratification system of science and contradicts central scientific principles such as objectivity'. Hence, despite the apparently objective nature of citation, it essentially reflects gendered realities (EU 2004). This was not mentioned by any of the respondents in the present study, reflecting taken-for-granted assumptions about the gender-neutral nature of citations as indicators of excellence.

Women and men frequently saw women as effectively colluding in their own poor evaluative performance by prioritising teaching and service and thus hindering their own opportunities for career progression:

[Women are] wasting their time doing the right thing ... They are more committed lecturers; they are more committed to the peripherals than the men: looking after the students, being more diligent with lecture preparation and ... commitments to the communities. And all those other areas which give them no brownie points when it comes to promotion. Not quantifiable. (woman 1)

Occasionally too, women were seen as disadvantaged by the amount of time they spent caring in the home and hence by their relative unavailability in a long hours working culture: 'you are not judging the quality of what they do within the 39-hour week, you are judging what they do twenty-four seven. And some people, more so women than men, have less time to devote twenty-four seven' (woman 7). This focus on quantity has been shown to have potentially gendered implications: with a less gender-biased measure of research productivity focusing on quality (genSET 2010). However, there is evidence that, even in terms of quantity, the gap between men and women's research output is reducing, with the remaining gap being explained by

differential access to resources, level and discipline (EU 2004; Xie and Shauman 1998). For some women, the problem was women's failure to 'market' their achievements (Mackenzie Davey 2008). Some pragmatically accepted that this was necessary, although they saw it as a male strategy:

I feel like for instance, maybe it's a woman thing, but I certainly wasn't selling myself the way I should have. And I realised you know you have to play the game as well ... he [a colleague] said to me 'do it the way the men do it ... sell yourself as best you can and gloat and gloat and gloat because no-one is going to read between the lines'. And he was so right, so I actually changed my whole portfolio based on that. (woman 10)

For the most part, neither men nor women considered that the criteria being used in the construction of excellence were masculinist, in the sense that they reinforced the value of male performance and male values in horizontally differentiated and vertically male-dominated organisations with predominantly male gatekeepers.

A reliance on intuitive feelings or subjective assessments involving judgement or potential emerged among some of those in senior positions. Thus, as in Lamont's (2009) study, some suggested that it is necessary to go beyond the factual information by using judgement: 'a lot of the time you are going on this word called potential You try and make your best judgement – these are judgement calls' (woman 7). Others referred implicitly to potential: 'that there is an expectation of consistent delivery beyond the promotion'. This implies a vague qualitative judgement:

you expect a person relative to his or her position to show that he or she is performing in a way that distinguishes, no, no, not distinguishes him, but shows that he or she is making the right strides relevant to the level in the discipline-that is very vague. (man 6)

There were occasional women who presented a more broadly based gendered construction of excellence, locating this in the context of 'academic citizenship'. This perception essentially sees the university as a community in which the individual is depicted as having responsibilities to various constituencies: responsibilities which transcend those involved in undertaking research, to include responsibilities to the student; to their department and to the university: a perception which is very much at odds with purportedly objective, quantitative KPIs.

For a job at a university, you are responsible for doing high quality teaching, you are responsible for being a good academic in terms of a good scholar. And in my view you also have the responsibility of what I call being an academic citizen. And being an academic citizen is in fact the service to your department, service to your faculty or service to your university or to your profession ... you are not a silo individual to come in here, to go to your office and do your research and do your teaching and that's it. You are an academic citizen of the institution and so therefore you have responsibilities to the institution, you've responsibilities to your profession. (woman 7)

In summary, in this section, the focus was on variation in the respondents' constructions of excellence and their recognition that although the criteria appeared clear, there were considerable complexities. Overall, there was little awareness of the gender implications of these constructions of excellence, with women being seen as 'the problem'. Very occasionally, the focus on numerical KPIs was challenged by those in senior positions.

Evaluative practices

Early neo-institutionalists such as Meyer and Rowan (1977, 54) were concerned with idealised cultural constructions and suggested that organisations must 'maintain the appearance that the myths actually work'. With DiMaggio and Powell (1983), 'the new institutionalism' became identified with a rejection of rationality as an explanation for organisational structure and an emphasis on legitimacy rather than on efficiency (Tolbert and Zucker 1983). However, neo-institutionalism did not acknowledge actor's agency. Macro-cultural myths and legitimacy are maintained by institutional logics, which can be observed at individual and organisational levels through the enactment of meaningful material practice (Boltanski 2011). The case study organisation endorses an institutional logic which legitimates the use of KPIs of excellence in the evaluative contexts of hiring, promotion and progression. This logic does not recognise the subjectivity involved in human decision-making and the effect of group dynamics on these processes.

Firstly, various aspects of the process, including the bureaucratisation of the promotion process and the composition of the boards were seen as inhibiting an objective assessment of a candidate's excellence. With application forms running up to 80 pages of text and 150–200 pages of appendices, the sheer size of the task for the university's evaluative boards was phenomenal. In this context, members of the board were seen as extremely unlikely to read any individual application in detail: 'nobody reads these, like reads prose, if you're assessing anything, it's you know – where are the numbers ... where is the evidence and tick it off' (man 4). Other respondents challenged the expectation that academics at entry level could be 'excellent' across all three areas of teaching, research and service.

Secondly, respondents adverted to various gendered aspects of the power dynamics within the boards themselves which, as they saw it, undermined the purportedly objective logic. In the case study university, hiring boards typically consist of five to seven people and promotion boards of 11–14 people. In both cases, the majority are typically male. The position of women is typically particularly weak in terms of voting members on these boards and their voices are seen as marginalised by their gender (Bourdieu 2001; Connell 1987):

It's not what the woman says or what the man says. It's the fact that it's coming from [a man or a woman]. Its gendered ... the person listening to it will automatically associate a positive connotation to whatever the man says and a less positive, less, just put it that way, to what the woman says. (woman 8)

In such group settings, the discussion typically mainly revolved around those candidates who could not be easily identified as excellent or clearly deficient: 'while you like to think all the successful candidates were outstanding ... you'd like to think that, and in many ways they are, but, but where you've a choice it can become, it can take longer' (man, academic 3). van den Brink and Benschop (2012) have shown how in such contexts gendered processes operate so that women are expected to be 'five-legged sheep', while male 'four-legged sheep' are acceptable: a pattern that reflects the application of different evaluative criteria to men and women (something that has been noted elsewhere: Foschi 1996, 2004; Ridgeway 2011). Occasionally, respondents recognised that gendered ties might be reflected in gender variation in the support for male and female candidates:

Guys tend to group together. They tend to form teams. It's something that's, I think it's natural in guys to do that ... and in the process of doing that, if you're not on the team,

you're outside the team. And there could be, not a, not if you like an overt gender bias, but there could be an implicit one on that basis. (man 2)

Lamont (2009) suggested that in the multidisciplinary research funding teams she studied, although there was an expectation that consistent and universalistic standards of evaluation would be applied, in practice, 'horse-trading' frequently occurred. Thus, respondents assented to decisions that others felt very strongly about, in the hope that in this way they would gain credibility and goodwill and that this flexibility would be reciprocated. This reflected the perception of the evaluation process as a pragmatic negotiating context. Similar patterns were referred to in the case study university. Thus, as long as decisions were 'within the zone of acceptability' (man 6), they were accepted. In such contexts, the chair could be very influential, both directly and indirectly. Thus, he/she could effectively promote particular constructions of excellence and thus differentially affect the evaluations of various (gendered) candidates. More generally, he/she could potentially play a key role during the group process in encouraging people to comment on individual candidates and to review their numerical assessments in the light of such comments. 'I mean obviously the chair will have [influence], direct the way the meeting goes' (man 2). In this study, as in Lamont's (2009) study, disciplinary backgrounds (which are highly related to gender) were seen as playing a role in evaluative assessments:

The scientists on the board will rate a historian as not that great because he's got one book. 'You've only got one book, I mean my people, and our people have got fifteen articles'. But then when a debate occurs, hang on a minute this is a book we'll say, Oxford University Press, it's been very favourably reviewed in the following reviews and this is how in the humanities and history we would judge this and they hear it. That's part of the debate about how the different disciplines define their research excellence. (man 6)

In the case study university, both science and history are in fact male-dominated at academic staff level, and this facilitated the identification of discipline rather than gender as key. In the Swedish research funding boards (Ahlqvist et al. 2013), observers noted the existence of gendered processes on particular boards. In this as in other studies (Currie, Thiele, and Harris 2002; O'Connor 2014a), women emerged as more likely to advert to this:

Women will say that. That you have to work longer and harder maybe in the industry to prove yourself better than a man ... certainly men got promoted here who certainly were nowhere near [as good as] shall we say the women. (woman 1)

Homosociability (Grummell, Lynch, and Devine 2009; Lipman Blumen 1976: i.e. the tendency to appoint people like oneself) has been widely identified as an important process in perpetuating gendered patterns. It was very evident in the present study, at both an individual and collective level. Thus, for example, a number of those in the evaluative processes specifically referred to their own (gendered) qualities, characteristics or experiences in explaining what they looked for in identifying excellence. Woman 4 (problematically) assumes that reflexivity will always exist and that it will eliminate bias: 'I'm sure I'm biased in the same way that when a particular person talks in a particular way it resonates with me. You just have to be aware of that.' For other women, there was a good deal of confusion as they sought to combine a focus on objective criteria in the definition of excellence on the one hand, while on the other hand, they recognised the reality of gendered micro-processes. Thus, for

example, woman 1 endorsed the idea that in the university 'excellence is research', not least because it is 'easier to assess'. However, she also notes that gender affects outcomes, through providing differential opportunities for increased visibility and the basis for emotional ties of loyalty and friendship: 'all that playing golf at the weekends, it certainly does help ... networking, networking on the golf course'.

It has been widely recognised that micro-politics (Morley 1999) and 'local logics' (Grummell, Lynch, and Devine 2009) can affect decisions. In the evaluative processes, particularly promotion, several of the candidates may be known to the board members. In that context, the formal procedures may be largely symbolic, insofar as prior and contingent micro-political processes may be such as to make it almost inevitable that some people will be selected. Prior knowledge or (gendered) stereotyping was also seen as likely to influence the outcome. The implications of this were recognised by some of the respondents: 'So it's my guess that the scores will bring in who they want to get promoted' (man 4).

Thirdly, a reliance on subjective feelings may exist in the evaluative context, with 'judgement' or 'potential' being used in differentiating between candidates. Thus, for example, a reliance on intuitive feelings generated by reading the first two pages of an application portfolio was referred to by man 3:

I only read his first two pages ... I gave him full marks on the basis of the first two pages. That was enough for me ... I didn't, I just flicked through the rest of it, and said yeah, absolutely.

Thus, as in Ahlqvist et al.'s (2013) study, he felt able to assess an application which he had not read and was completely unaware of possible gender bias in this context. Another of the men admits to relying on his feelings in making evaluative judgements, despite his stress elsewhere on the importance of objectivity reflected in numerical scores: 'You get a feeling for somebody, you know, you feel well this person now is going to be sitting in their office all day and they'll never talk to anybody.' Implicit in this is the idea that regardless of the excellence of a candidate in terms of KPIs, there is a judgement about his/her potential and even 'soft skills'. Such practices are at odds with a focus on objectively verifiable KPIs.

For others, excellence is located in a spatial and temporal context: 'expertise can be contextually defined'. Thus, for one respondent, a key consideration is 'the alignment' of individuals' skills and talents (Chorn 1991) with the relevant academic unit, and ultimately with the university: 'alignment means they can be different, they can bring a different set of strengths ... I look at alignment in the sense of what are we trying to do ... would they match?' (woman 7). Male academic 6 suggested that the applicants' own work context was critical: 'I'd even ask if a person had the article in *Nature*, I'd look, we'd, the board, [would ask] when was that published?, was that published while the person was still on the back of the Ph.D. or post-doc year?'. Evidence from the Swedish Council (Ahlqvist et al. 2013) suggests that such concerns with intellectual autonomy were more likely to be raised in the case of women. Only those in the more senior academic management positions legitimated the identification of such subjective elements in the evaluative processes. There was no evidence that they considered the possibility of gender bias in this context.

Fourthly, evidence of the gap between the construction of excellence and evaluative practices occasionally emerged more explicitly. Thus, for example, through personal friendships, candidates were able to compare scores with other candidates. In

one case, this revealed that a successful (male) candidate with considerably less teaching experience and the same kind and level of teaching evaluations scored higher on teaching than an unsuccessful (female) candidate. On raising this issue in feedback sessions, the response, as she saw it, was one of discomfort and surprise: “oh maybe I’m very naive but I didn’t think you’d share scores”. And that spoke volumes to me, like why would he be worried about people sharing scores with each other?” (woman 10). Her conclusion was that teaching scores were seen as less important than research ones, and could be ‘adjusted’: ‘if your research is excellent, and if you have the bare minimum done for teaching, the board would increase your teaching to excellent’. This implied that teaching was not important and undermined her confidence in the evaluative process. As in Bird and Rhoton’s (2011) study, she did not consider that gender dynamics might have been at work in this context.

In this section, it was suggested that the purportedly objective KPIs in the institutional logic were unevenly applied in evaluative contexts. Thus, organisational actors’ introduced subjective elements (such as judgement or potential) and outcomes were seen as reflecting the power dynamics operating within boards (e.g. gendered interactional processes; gendered homosociability; ‘horse-trading’; micro-politics). Such practices undermined the logic of objective KPIs and potentially the myth of excellence. They also facilitated the perpetuation of gendered practices, although this was only occasionally recognised.

Summary and conclusions

A neo-institutional approach focusing on meaning in general and institutionalised myths in particular is particularly relevant to legitimacy in organisations such as universities. This article is concerned with the myth of excellence as used in the evaluation of faculty in higher education institution. It highlights the ways in which the purportedly gender-neutral and objective criteria of excellence, reflected in KPIs, are to varying degrees accepted and implemented, reflecting unrealistic assumptions about the possibility of excluding subjective elements from evaluative processes (Lamont 2009).

These ideas are explored in the context of a case study organisation. It draws on data from semi-structured qualitative interviews with 23 academic staff (11 males, 12 females) in that university. Hence, the generalisability of these findings is limited without testing in other contexts. Officially, in the case study university, excellence is assessed on the basis of 32–46 specific KPIs, spread across teaching, research and service, with scores on these dimensions 70% or greater being defined as excellent. The method of analysis of the interviews was thematic. The concept of excellence was a key driver in the research, with its uneasy relationship with KPIs as a definition of excellence emerging as a way of explaining those patterns that emerged from successive readings of the transcripts.

Variations in the definitions of excellence emerged among the respondents, although research was overwhelmingly seen as the most important criterion. Nevertheless, complexities were identified arising from the difficulty of identifying thresholds; balancing within and between criteria; with references to ‘taken-for-granted’ definitions of good quality journals which transcended computation. Very occasionally, the logic which underpinned these numerical, purportedly gender-neutral, objective constructions of excellence was challenged.

The practices involved in the application of the institutional logic of excellence were also seen as problematic. To some extent, this was seen as generated by the power dynamics operating within the board. Furthermore, those with authority saw themselves as entitled to endorse a subjective construct of excellence: one that includes references to 'judgement' and 'potential'. The potentially gendered nature of both KPIs and subjective constructions of excellence was largely ignored, with women being seen as 'the problem'. Thus, such practices implicitly reflected and reinforced 'misrecognition' in Frazer's (2008) terms. Insofar as we accept that gender exists at systemic, organisational, interactional and individual levels (Wharton 2012), the question as to whether constructions of excellence can ever be gender-neutral has to be faced. If it is not possible to develop such constructions, it could be argued that there is a 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) in encouraging women to think that this is possible. However at the EU level, and within science, engineering, technology and business, there is an increasing recognition that diversity facilitates innovation and that gendered processes effectively obscure the available talent. The idea that 'gender equality is good for scientific quality' (Pollitzer 2011, 101; see also Mavin and Bryans 2002) is literally unthinkable in many universities. This, however, can be seen as raising questions about the extent to which universities are effectively perpetuating male privilege, and the implications of this for their role within a rapidly changing world, where gender equality has been seen as key in facilitating economic growth and research innovation (EU 2012; OECD 2012). In that context, the question becomes whether universities can survive without devising ways of measuring excellence in a way which does not involve gender 'misrecognition' (Frazer 2008).

Underpinning these gender issues is a concern with the viability of an institutional logic which legitimates the use of KPIs of excellence. Thus, this article raises fundamental questions about the implications of such a logic for the credibility of a myth of excellence. In a university context where the legitimacy of the organisation is ultimately premised on that myth, this potentially raises even more fundamental questions.

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