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Higher Education in Art & Design
Arts, design, creative media
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Working Paper

Women In Leadership:

Cracking the Code –

Progression and Promotion

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ISBN:

978-1-86218-251-6 Date: 14/05/2025 CHEAD Women in Leadership Event: Cracking the Code - Progression and Promotion (Working Paper for Policy Development) [PRINT]

[UoH Imprint] 978-1-86218-252-3 CHEAD Women in Leadership Event: Cracking the Code - Progression and Promotion (Working Paper for Policy Development) [ePub] [UoH Imprint]

CHEAD Women in Leadership Working Group

Our ‘Cracking the Code’ event in May 2025 was the third event in the *Women in Leadership* series. It brought together women at various career stages within art and design settings to consider what and how we might collectively challenge prevailing promotion systems in HE as well as offering a space of creative leadership, solidarity and community-building. We were delighted to host Jenny Garrett OBE, whose keynote lecture ‘The Silent Roar: The Power Within, The Change Beyond, Women Redefining Leadership’ opened up a powerful discussion around self-empowerment and structures of support. Our second keynote speaker, Professor Caron Gentry, spoke on the topic of ‘Strategic Alignment: Preparing Our Promotion Application’. Both speakers and the breakout sessions that followed offered a safe space for the gathered group to take stock as to what has been learnt from the past, to consider what no longer serves us in the present, and to focus on what could lie ahead for us to cultivate, as we balance professional advancement and wellbeing. The upswell of energy created has been brought together in this paper, where we present a series of interventions and ask: at local, sector and government levels. We advocate for meaningful and lasting change, that moves beyond the performance of metrics and focuses on pro-social actions for cracking the code of progression and promotion.

We are a self-organising group, convened as part of the CHEAD membership, but not exclusive to that membership. We take the definition of ‘woman’ in its broadest sense to include trans, cis and queer women within the HEI landscape. At this stage, we feel it important to open up our sessions to ‘women’, recognising the need to build ways in which male allies can become part of this community. For women to achieve equity, we need good men to be alongside, as allies, champions and agitators of change.

Decision-making has taken the form of both responsive and proactive thinking, and actions, noting the concerns and ‘asks’ brought to us by women within our sector, and within our own research projects and wider practical observations.

Executive Summary/Abstract

It is now over 12 years since The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education published its research into [Women and Higher Education: Absences and Aspirations](#). While gender gaps have reduced, it is still notable that at leadership and governance levels – including professors and directors – there remains more to be done in policy and legislation. Whilst there is a range of binding international and national legal, regulatory and policy frameworks, which require organisations to actively address and shift towards gender parity, men remain advantaged at every stage of their academic careers. The oft quoted reduced gender gaps mask the fact that though more women enter HEIs, they remain at lower grades or leave the sector¹ (note the attached lexicon of 'leaky pipeline'; 'ivory ceiling', 'glass ceiling').

It is notable that in institutions where more equitable gender balances appear at the top of the organisation they perform better². Further research suggests that advancing women into top roles not only improves business outcomes yet can also strengthen governance and resilience in the face of risk. This same research also reveals that women leaders often exhibit inclusive leadership styles that enhance collaboration, employee engagement, and fairness – qualities shown to increase productivity and team performance³. When looking

¹ Jack, P. (2024). Women ‘take 15 years more than men’ to become professors. *Times Higher Education*. [online] 21 Jun. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/women-take-15-years-more-men-become-professors>

² Lordan, G., & Salehzadeh Nobari, K. (2025). Finite-sample non-parametric bounds with an application to the causal effect of workforce gender diversity on firm performance [Preprint]. arXiv.

³ Lordan, G. (2021). The GOOD FINANCE framework. Women in Banking and Finance & The Inclusion Initiative, London School of Economics. <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/113507>

to achieve a positive level of gender balance required to make tangible differences, it is not enough to simply appoint women into senior roles, as they are often isolated in that space, and are often not holistically supported to achieve their full potential in such contexts (for instance, promoting women leaders into a position where a 'glass cliff' is a high possibility). Instead, we believe that there needs to be a consistent pipeline of talented women across *all* aspects of HE, from professional services and teaching and learning, to operational, people and organisations, and research and knowledge exchange. Women leaders need to be wholly scaffolded and given agency through a pro-social system of support, coaching and mentoring. Given burnout is an increasing concern, this empowerment must be done in a responsible, timely and sustainable manner⁴. Simply put, we need to actively and create robust channels that herald, champion and elevate women leaders to positions of responsibility that echo their abilities, and at the same time, clearly challenge the prevailing system from all angles.

If we look at the Women in Higher Education's (WHEN) pioneering and challenging project '100 Black Women Professors NOW' – which has just celebrated the 100th black woman professor – we can identify key elements of what we need to look to ensure equity of opportunity AND to dismantle the deep-rooted barriers across the sector. WHEN's integrated approach has included career coaching, sponsorship, mentoring and community building; they have worked directly with senior leaders and Vice Chancellors to improve understanding, engagement and dedicated action. Taken together, these have resulted in genuine cultural change.

Inspired by WHEN's work, the Women in Leadership Group of CHEAD held its annual online workshop in May 2025 to look closely at the hidden language, lexicon and processes

⁴ Elsevier. (2025). Empowering potential: Faculty as your key competitive asset - Data book. Elsevier. https://assets.ctfassets.net/o78em1y1w4i4/4qAs8QjABPoLOvgOGxvfBL/d01bf64e8290ca8c820a3168513f820e/EL_S_Empowering-potential-databook.pdf

that lie within progression and promotion systems within HE. Although primarily focused on the Reader/Professor progression, they acted as visible markers of the kinds of invisible, intangible plus visible and tangible barriers that women specifically meet across their careers. That this is still a sticky topic worth discussing and advocating is notable and disappointing and shows that this must change. We therefore are framing the following sharing of findings as challenges to our institutions, for HEIs to respond in real life to activate the legal and ethical regulatory requirements of universities to provide equality and equity of opportunity for *all*.

The key findings from our research and conversations highlighted the following barriers to progression and promotion within Higher Education:

- Obscure language, terminology, acronyms and metrics that are utilised by senior levels of the institution when assessing promotion applications;
- Criteria that require a career trajectory that is neither too fast or too slow, that actively work against careers with interruptions due to maternity or caring responsibilities;
- Criteria that prioritise funding levels that fall out with disciplinary opportunities, and often reflect historic trends rather than current external budgets;
- Progression panels formed of those already in positions of seniority, who often judge their evaluations against their own subjective route into seniority, regardless of more equitable contemporaneous criteria;
- Lack of consistent relevant mentorship and coaching by inspirational peers (seniors, on a similar track) to support the building of profile/portfolio enroute to progression applications;
- The low levels of women senior leaders and professors in art and design disciplines (outside of small specialist art and design institutions) and thus

- Limited routes that continue to prioritise individualised outputs, impact and achievements over collaborative, pro-social and collegial working holistic scholarship practices/research.
- Traditional routes for professorship through research and teaching take precedence over practice pathways

Pro-Social Actions: Moving beyond performativity of equity

Our event was titled 'Cracking the Code' as we felt that there was indeed a gatekeeper identity still being preserved by seniors in the institutions that needed to be 'cracked'; that rapidly changing tensions in the HEI sector were putting high pressure on individuals to match the 'code' of ever changing progression criteria, and that all of us had struggled to be progress in our careers and wanted to share our learnings. We chose to focus upon three strategic aspects to address directly in order to strengthen for the betterment of women: 1) the system and gender balance across senior roles within HE; 2) sharing what the language of progression and promotion requires; and 3) how to agitate as a changemaker for changed processes and approaches at institutional and regulatory levels. Taken together, we hope that they will provide a sustainable and equitable platform for all colleagues within HE to enter, successfully progress, and affect others, including being part of, and building, an open, supportive, transparent and fair pipeline of talent.

Cracking the Code: What does the criteria mean?

All universities and HE providers set their own criteria and processes for internal progression, most notably for those seeking to progress to Reader/Associate Professor and Professor. These are often capstone roles, marking prestige and significant contribution to the field. Whilst originally established as markers of research excellence nationally and

internationally, more recently these roles have expanded to include leadership and management, citizenship, knowledge exchange, and teaching and learning. We welcome this broadening out as it recognises the impact that colleagues can have across institutions and in communities, allowing the demonstration, importance and organic social nature of most art and design scholarship and practice. This also includes the innovative teaching and educational leadership of art and design practitioners.⁵

However, the processes and criteria can also often be opaque, repetitive and populated by obfuscating language. Format, lexicon, style and documents can be complex, multi-layered and lengthy, privileging those who have strong narrative and writing skills often; rather than being neuro-affirmative and offering diverse options for expression, demonstration of evidence and multi-media portfolios of professional outputs. Completion of applications can take many weeks and can add strain and tension to incredibly busy professionals who already have achieved the outputs, accolades and performance data that is being asked to be collated into a singular institutional package.

Although the promotion schedule is often annual and predictable, mentoring and coaching of potential applicants - indeed all individuals - is largely ad hoc, and based upon existing networks of patronage, connections and if the process becomes more than a line manager ticking exercise. Expert mentors and trained coaches, matched to individual women for their capabilities, success in 'cracking the code', voice, placement and advocacy in senior and equity-focused roles would certainly aid in transformational progressional applications.

⁵ Lucas, I. (2025). Academic Success: Why Career Progression Must Look Beyond Research. Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/06/10/redefining-academic-success-why-career-progression-must-look-beyond-research/>

Some universities have worked hard to address these progression barriers, as well as recognising that people's careers and profile might not be singular, linear, or fit a 'golden thread'. Some institutional assessments of criteria involve complex systems of scoring - as attempts for objectivity - other assessment processes are nuanced and interpretative, dependent on personal knowledge of the applicant, and inductive meaning-making of the written application wording. It remains unclear and most often sporadic in the quantity and quality of transparent constructive support and training accompany any of the progression processes and largely, the emphasis seems to remain on the writing abilities, agency, effort, spare energy and time of the individual, thus perpetuating the prevailing systems.

At a local/institutional level, we believe that we need to:

- **Increase Advocacy:** we call upon existing Senior Leaders and Professors across the sector to become individual and outspoken champions of women's progression, internally and externally, and to ensure that policies are reviewed towards actioning positive cultural shifts towards equity, reward and transparency;
- **Practical Support:** we call on colleagues to mentor, support and champion women peers as they navigate progression and promotion criteria, aiding fuller understanding of what is expected, and folding in professional robust resources to help those peers succeed;
- **Mentorship and Coaching:** we need all institutions to proactively build in high quality tailored mentor training, leadership coaching, and systems to support and build talent pipelines and succession planning.

Cracking the System: Building policy and systemic change

While we know all institutions have training, policies and processes to reduce unconscious bias, ensure equitable approaches and to monitor progression and recruitment, it is still the case that male colleagues progress to senior roles more quickly and more frequently than their female counterparts. This creates an imbalance in itself, yet also hampers real culture shifts in understanding the different trajectories that colleagues' careers might take. For example, a female colleague might achieve Reader/Associate Professorship at a later stage in their career but might then progress to Professor status relatively swiftly – panels must be trained to consider the evidence supplied and the criteria advertised, rather than to over-focus on the timelines between stages.

We ask all institutions to:

- Review all progression and promotion policies, practices and processes to ensure criteria are clear and that evidence required is transparently established, fair and equitable;
- Require mandatory training for all progression panel members to ensure compliance with criteria and policies;
- Build meaningful feedback for all applicants into progression and promotion processes so that they can understand why they were successful or unsuccessful in their application, and can have a face-to-face meeting if requested to elaborate on feedback (pro-neuroaffirmative);
- Build mentoring and coaching into all progression and promotion policies for all prospective applicants to access in good time beforehand, in order to support high-quality applications and scaffold talent pipelines where applications are more likely successful;

- Deliver training workshops for all colleagues seeking progression and promotion to build peer support and as part of ongoing talent management and scaffolding for success, and meaningful action once promoted;
- Report annually on gender gaps across applications, and on the outcome of successful internal progression on these gender gaps.
- Seek out greater alignment and connectivity with sector leading frameworks, such as the Athena Swan Charter ⁶

Cracking Open: Demanding regulatory change

Gender balance and equity in progression and promotion systems should be of key importance beyond individual institutions and departments. There is clear evidence that where the routes to senior roles are structured to ensure gender balance, that the institution benefits from a broadening out of leadership and management skills and practices, financial performance and improvement of culture. These arise from a greater emphasis on collegial and collaborative working practices which are not the preserve of female colleagues, but arise from transparent, gender balanced and equitable promotion and progression to senior roles and leadership.

Suggested Legislative and Regulatory changes across the following:

- HE regulators and PSRB bodies should implement Gender Equality Policies, challenge discriminatory practice, review, evaluate and identify bias where it exists, including gender pay gaps, and take positive action to address imbalances and assess for impact beyond the performative;

⁶ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter>

- Governing frameworks in higher education (e.g. OfS, HESA, Research Councils, QAA) to develop and publish national databases documenting national data on female governors, professors and senior leaders in higher education;
- Research funding bodies be required to report on data on gender in research applications, successful awards and gender focused research thematics. Targets for improvement should be set to challenge existing cultures, with objectives put in place to address gender gaps;
- Auditors and external assessors should provide regular and rigorous scrutiny of compliance with the UK Gender Equality Duty (2007) and the UK Equality Act (2010) with institutions required to publish data against benchmarking metrics;
- Educational policies should actively and overtly champion gender equity and organisational cultures;
- Government-led funding should be offered to stimulate structured interventions that build gender balance at senior levels, support sustained presence of women leaders at this level, and resource the talent pipelines for generations of women leaders to come.

Biographies

Professor Rowan Bailey, PhD, is Strategic Lead for Research in the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of Huddersfield. She is also Director of the Centre for Cultural Ecologies in Art, Design and Architecture, leads the National Creative Health Hub and leads several research funded projects on knowledge and cultural exchange and place-based cultural development. She is a member of CHEAD and regularly contributes to priorities aligned to research, innovation, knowledge and cultural exchange. See: <https://research.hud.ac.uk/institutes-centres/ceada/> and <https://pure.hud.ac.uk/en/persons/rowan-bailey/>

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Sandra has 30 years of experience in Higher Education leadership.

Professor Catherine Dormor, PhD, FRSA is Pro Vice-Chancellor and Head of the College of Creative Arts & Technologies at the University of Westminster, leading institution-wide projects across technologies for teaching and learning and chair of the University Research Ethics Committee. She is Professor of Textile Practices & Feminisms, with research that is practice-led and that draws on the language and practices of textiles to discuss what it means to be in community with one another. She has a number of publications, acts as reviewer for several journals and publishers and mentors colleagues across the sector.

Dr Catherine Glover is Northumbria University Distinguished Teaching Fellow 2025 and Assistant Professor at Northumbria University's School of Design, Arts and Creative Industries, where she leads the MA Creative and Cultural Industries Management programme. She co-chaired the Women in Leadership 'On Balancing the System and the Self, Promotion and Progression' workshop (May 2025) and facilitated embodied activities on CHEAD's inaugural Creative Leadership programme (2025–26). She is a Fellow of Advance HE, and publishes research in storytelling, fashion, nature, leadership and neuroeducation. Cat is also a founder of an eco-consultancy offering embodied experiencing, somatic coaching and forest bathing as routes to wellbeing, self-actualisation and balance.

Professor (Dr.) Rhiannon Jones FRSA is Head of Civic and Communities at the University of Derby and founder of CivicLAB™, leading institution-wide civic strategy and engagement. A civic practice specialist, she is chair of the UNESCO UK Learning Cities Network and Cumulus' Contemporary Working Art Group; and member of the Universities Alliance

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senior network for Place, Partnerships & Regional Innovation. She is Founder and CEO of Designing Dialogue CIC, creator of the award-winning S.H.E.D project, and a published academic with recent works for Routledge, Taylor & Francis, and Intellect. A UKRI/ESRC grant holder and national keynote speaker, her leadership has generated significant regional impact through major cultural and civic programmes.

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