by Emma Jeanes & Rajani Naidoo

Addressing Gender Equality in Economics as a Discipline in a UK Business School

1. Introduction

Gender inequality is a persistent challenge and can be particularly difficult to overcome in male-dominated professions that can then serve to perpetuate barriers to entry. This requires that we tackle vertical inequalities and their associated pay inequalities. We also need to tackle broader occupational segregation that creates inequalities in team composition that can impact the culture of a field and perpetuate the gendered view of it. Certain fields are known to attract more men, or women, creating occupational segregation. This can lead to preferential conditions whereby certain occupations become better paid than others, with male-dominated professions securing higher salaries, on average, than their female-dominated equivalents. But in professions that are also known to be influential in policy-making, the impacts are potentially more wide-ranging and significant, reflecting imbalances of power and influencing society.

Higher Education (HE) can play a role in ensuring that these influential fields are as gender balanced as possible, by encouraging diversity in the profile of students who study it, those who develop a career in academia to shape the field, as well as those who enter the profession in wider society.

Economics is a field that exemplifies these challenges – being both a male-dominated profession and one that secures high salaries and influential careers thereafter. Economics is also a powerful academic body of knowledge influencing government policies and society. In this article, we focus on the Department of Economics at the University of Exeter Business School. Similar to other UK HE economics departments, the Department of Economics is dominated by male academics, reflecting a pattern seen across the UK that in 2022/23 averaged 30% female to 70% male academics in individual institutions (with a 37:63 split across universities overall). This is a proportion that has persisted over time. Unsurprisingly, fewer women economists at lower levels lead to fewer achieving professorial status, or careers in economics outside of HE.

As a university, school and within the department, there is a strong commitment to tackle this gender imbalance. A wide variety of initiatives, including work related to Athena Swan, and other important initiatives has been key to shifts in thinking and practice. Below we set out the start of our journey and our learning from it.

2. The Case of Economics

The differences in gender inequality across various fields of a business school can be missed as distinctions reside under broader headings and distinctions can be blurred. Within the context of business schools, this is typically found when one differentiates between so-called 'softer' subjects (typically human resource related) and 'harder' subjects (with a more scientific focus, such as finance, analytics and economics). Assessed together, the differences can be diluted as they are averaged out. Separated, they become clearer, and the distinction is not only between subject choice but also outcomes, with finance and economics subjects leading to higher average salaries than their 'softer subject' business school counterparts.

Male-dominated academic subjects create particular challenges for securing gender equality across all arenas of society. Gender equality in relation to higher education requires a pipeline of suitably trained academics entering the field, which is impacted by those studying the subjects, that in turn is influenced by subject selections and applications made at school. Gender equality is also reflected in the workplace when fewer women go on to develop careers in a field or receive lower pay for their work, in turn making this a lower profile career option for women that may influence future generations.

Such inequalities lead to concerns for the choices made, particularly the extent to which choices are made based on psychological differences and preferences or are culturally shaped, thus leading to socially-shaped career aspirations and choices (Stern and Madison, 2022). Research suggests various reasons for this gender gap including gender stereotyping which has a powerful impact on academic and career choices and the 'leaky pipeline' effect attributed to various causes including motherhood and parenting.

A negative feedback loop occurs with the shortage of female role models reinforcing gender stereotypes in wider culture, to the detriment of women pursuing education and career opportunities. Whatever the reasons, HE has a responsibility to challenge social expectations that lead men and women to choose particular fields particularly when there are differential outcomes, and to encourage and support men and women to progress in these fields.

3. Tackling the pipeline *into* HE

Both for our institution and the field more widely, a longer-term horizon is required for change. One way of addressing this is through outreach work into secondary education to reach students who are considering what subjects to study in their final school years. Recent figures suggest that one in six boys compared to one in 17 girls study economics at school (Advani, Griffith and Smith, 2019) which is potentially due to a tendency for girls to avoid economics as a subject as something perceived as 'not for them' (Keys, 2022). However, this may also be influenced by the availability of economics at advanced level secondary education, and the availability of specialist economics teachers that might inspire a more diverse student pool (Advani, Sen and Warwick, 2021). At the stage of HE, this cannot easily be overcome through simply not requiring economics A-level to study economics at university, since the overwhelming evidence is that very few who do not study economics at A-level go on to study it in HE. Furthermore, fewer females than males convert their school-level economics into a university degree (*ibid*). This means that decisions made as early as 15 years of age can be decisive factors for a higher education degree or career in economics.

The University of Exeter has engaged in school outreach work attempting to encourage females into economics, but at the start, efforts were predominantly piecemeal and limited geographically given staff time and location. The scope of this activity has been broadened by working collaboratively and in partnership with other agencies. For example, the Royal Economics Society *Discover Economics* initiative targets the crucial years when students make educational choices that impact their future careers and this has framed much of the work at the University of Exeter. More recently this has culminated in the University of Exeter Business School becoming the first Royal Economic Society *Women in Economics (WEN) Champion* that seeks to improve gender representation and support the careers of women in economics in the UK. As well as facilitating events and speakers, this initiative aims to inspire further action and momentum in creating a more gender-equal profession.

Values can be embedded and reinforced in everyday activities, such as ensuring female role models are visible to students from the outset of their educational careers, and through supporting our student societies to host events that explore gender inequality in the workplace and how they can work to overcome it. Taken together the aim is to enable an intergenerational approach to tackling the gender balance in economics which could play a key role in shaping the field for the future. Despite a slightly favourable offer to application rate being observed in undergraduate, and postgraduate applications for females, this pattern is reversed in the acceptance rate. Combined with fewer female to male applications at all levels of study, the gender bias persists. By engaging the interests and bringing the field to the next generation of potential female economists, some of the seemingly intractable patterns can be challenged.

4. Tackling the pipeline *in* HE.

The pipeline into economics careers is influenced by the intake of undergraduate students, which in Exeter fluctuates around the level of three female students to every seven males. The gender balance improves at the postgraduate taught level, with fluctuations each year around a comparatively even split. However, this does not translate into postgraduate research intake, which declines below 30%, suggesting a future reduction rather than growth in home-grown talent and an ongoing barrier to change unless substantial support is put into place to encourage and nurture this talent. In a context in which fewer females exist in the job market compared to men, the ability to make significant immediate changes is both limited and competitive. This is particularly true since other institutions are equally keen to improve their gender balance targeting the same pool of talent. This may be tackled by ensuring recruitment is proactive in encouraging applications from females.

To close the gender gap in relation to progression in higher education, a mix of policies is deployed including attempts to tackle deep-seated cultural issues to attract and retain candidates who are most likely to require additional work-life balance support. Ensuring that the field is widened and a diversity of research and teaching areas are valued may attract a more diverse range of postgraduate research applications, as well as members of staff. At Exeter, this also includes a wide range of EDI-related research (undertaken by all genders) that exemplifies the importance of this subject as well as research input into key areas such as the gender pay gap.

In the medium term, and more specifically focused on the current position in HE, it is important to ensure that a pipeline of female economists is being attracted and retained, and being nurtured and supported in their careers. In Exeter, there have been more recent improvements in the proportion of female staff achieving Associate Professor/Reader but the aim of increasing the number of full professors has remained challenging, reflecting amongst other things the impact of time it takes to progress internal talent. Equality impact analyses of new and ongoing improvements to our academic promotions and pay progression frameworks have been implemented. Targeted reviews assessing promotion potential (considering all cases to ensure that no-one languishes on a grade without the support and encouragement to progress) ensures that the tendency for women to be less comfortable with self-promotion (Exley and Kessler, 2022) does not hinder their advancement. More nuanced consideration of how extended periods of time out of work, typically for childcare, can impact meeting grant commitments and research deliverables can be part of the consideration of promotion panels. Mentoring is experienced as effective and the university, school and department is in the process of developing a robust, university-wide mentoring scheme underpinned by common principles but with flexibility in relation to department priorities and disciplines. Recent evidence suggests that effective mentoring can be better achieved when mentors are also learning from mentees rather than assuming knowledge resides 'higher up' to be passed down (Zhang, Wang and Galinsky, 2023).

5. Creating the context for change

We have linked our wide-spanning work in addressing gender challenges to the framework of the Athena SWAN charter, which is widely used throughout the UK as a framework. While there is the danger of what researchers such as Yarrow and Johnston (2022) term 'political peacocking', a study by the University of Oxford's Radcliffe Department of Medicine and Arhaus University in Denmark found that its contextually embedded and systemic approach to dynamic action planning and the inclusive focus on all genders and categories of staff and students was the 'single most comprehensive gender equality scheme in Europe' (Kalpazidou *et al.*, 2020). The Charter has been deployed to link to our whole-institutional change activities to open up honest discussion, and to scrutinise our policies, practices and culture so that barriers for members of our institution are dismantled. This has been combined with our work on other charters including the Race Equality Charter, our participation in leadership development initiatives such as the Women Higher Education Network 100 Black Female Professors Now programme which aims to increase the number of black women in the academic pipeline. The goal is to provide equity of opportunity while dismantling the deep-rooted barriers that are preventing gender equality. In addition, we are part of Aurora which is a unique partnership bringing together leadership experts and higher education institutions together to take positive action to address the under-representation of women in leadership positions within the higher education sector. In addition, we participate in the Elevate leadership programme which is an award-winning, cross-institutional programme creating space for global majority women to explore their authentic leadership, increase their influence, understand the impact of historic and structural barriers and connect with each other.

Data has been crucial to our work and the appointment to a new People and Insights Manager role in the Culture and Inclusion team has helped in making improvements to our data utilisation, enhancing reporting accuracy and disaggregation.

Individual Champions

Creating a supportive and inclusive environment is a necessary, but not sufficient condition to reduce gender inequality in the workplace. It also requires individual champions with the passion and commitment to dedicate themselves towards leading change. At Exeter, it is through the actions of these individuals that substantial resources have been dedicated to gender equality initiatives and time has been devoted to 'taking action'. Institutionally, this needs to be underpinned by dedicated time, reflected in workload, that supports this work, and mechanisms that recognise and reward the outputs of it. Although champions may emerge from their own desire to see things change, unless it is given time and recognised, it will likely become unsustainable or add to inequalities by transferring the burden of responsibility to those willing to sacrifice their own time or time that might otherwise be dedicated to career-enhancing activities - precisely the opposite of the desired outcome! Following Athena Swan principles, workload is allocated for that work, but time is also given to EDI-specific roles, and recognition to anyone who engages in broader EDI citizenship activity.

Collective Commitment

The engagement in this activity is not limited to an enclave of female academics but is shared widely. This is reflected in the engagement with surveys and focus groups, and support for EDI activity. Allyship is established in gender equality work, and Athena Swan in particular (see Nash *et al.*, 2021) but it manifests itself in many

forms (De Souza and Schmader, 2024), including creating a supportive climate and space for relevant activities to take place and be valued. Allyship assumes action by those who are perceived as the advantaged group. Often, actions taken to address gender equality are led by the disadvantaged – in this case, women – as they have a better understanding of the challenges, through their lived experience, and the greatest incentive to ensure things change. But they often operate from a marginalised position and thus are less able to effect change, or fear being perceived as complainants. In contrast, when those belonging to groups who enjoy more privilege address the inequalities, change is accelerated and the responsibility is shared.

Challenging conversations and critical self-reflection

As part of the Athena Swan action plan, we have biennial surveys that encompass anonymous surveys and confidential focus groups to understand the challenges facing departments in ensuring an inclusive and supportive work environment that tackles gender inequality. At Exeter, it is pleasing to report that the department is generally seen as fair and inclusive and the contribution is recognised. But there are always areas for development, and a number of these have been cited above. There are still areas of perceived inequalities, both those that can be reflected in quantitative terms, such as promotion, but also a sense of value and recognition. But a crucial first step is to enable this to be voiced and to have those uncomfortable conversations in which senior leaders, in particular, reflect on processes that may sustain perceptions and practices.

Within the economics department there is a commitment to better understanding, with all senior staff members undertaking unconscious bias training as well as the mandatory EDI training.

At university level, a new post of Deputy Vice-Chancellor for People and Culture has been created to demonstrate leadership from the most senior levels. In addition, each department, faculty and professional service divisions have a Wellbeing, Inclusion and Culture Committee (WICC) which feeds into the central WICC committee chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for People and Culture and the Executive Director of HR. This group is also responsible for the setting and monitoring of institutional targets, the identification of critical areas for intervention and bringing together research initiatives and actions in relation to research culture working in partnership with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Impact.

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