by Rachel Ashworth

Embracing Equality and the 'Rounded Academic'. Reflections from the Dean of a Public Value Business School

Introduction

The theme of International Women's Day 2024 was to 'embrace equity'. We were encouraged to imagine a gender-equal world free from bias, one that is diverse, equitable and inclusive. Yet, it is apparent to all that this kind of world is some way away. During the last year, we have witnessed multiple inquiries highlighting sobering evidence of discriminatory cultures and behaviours in high profile organisations in every part of the world and in a variety of sectors, including business, sport, the media and within our governments and public services. And a plethora of reports have been published in response, recommending rapid and radical structural and cultural change to ensure that organisations and their workplaces become more equal and inclusive.

Business schools are well placed to respond to this call to action as we have the expertise and many of us already collaborate with organisations and governments that are committed to enhancing equality. Yet questions remain about our performance on equality and our ability to 'walk the talk'. We have struggled to narrow our own 'gender gap' and overcome a pervasive gender bias, while women academics relay sobering accounts of their lived experience in our schools (Galizzi, McBride and Siboni, 2024; Khan *et. al*, 2024; Prothero, 2024). This indicates that the organisational climate for women academics is still a 'chilly' one and we have some way to go in achieving our ambition to create a gender-equal environment for work and study (Roseberry *et al.* 2016).

In this article, I talk through my career journey from research assistant to business school dean, offering reflections on my experiences and my decision-making along the way. These reflections resonate with recent accounts from women in academia although I am mindful that I have benefited from a series of privileges, including those associated with being white, able-bodied and having secure and well-paid employment. I am conscious that while I talk about equality in broad terms, I do place particular emphasis on gender equality and that my reflections are drawn from employment at just one business school – Cardiff.

With the great benefit of hindsight, a series of themes emerge from this account. The first is an aspiration throughout my career to be a 'rounded academic' and to promote this archetype within my school and the wider institution. Second, and linked to the first, is a concern for equality which has developed and strengthened over the years. The third is a latent public service ethos which was further ignited by the school's formulation of an explicit Public Value strategy in 2015.

I finish by reflecting on some of the steps we have taken at Cardiff and by arguing that more could be achieved if business schools and their parent universities firmly embraced the 'rounded academic' as a dominant career archetype. We should also make a greater investment in a wider programme of public value-oriented research, particularly that focused on equality, diversity and inclusion. This could form part of a sector-wide effort to reduce inequality for the benefit of the future generations of students, colleagues and communities who will work and study with us.

From Research Assistant to Dean

A minority pursuit

I began my career in 1995 as a research assistant, while undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis. I joined Cardiff as a researcher with my supervisor from the University of Glamorgan and at this point, I was quite unsure about academia. My parents and grandparents had backgrounds in the NHS, local government, and the civil service and it was no coincidence that I had chosen to study public administration. I was always keen to make a difference and I was very sceptical about whether I could achieve this within an academic context. My supervisor always assured me this was possible and, with hindsight, this 'public service ethos' served me well during my career in what would become a Public Value Business School.

Women academics were in a stark minority at the time and this was very much reflected in the workplace culture, whether in formal meetings or more casual social settings. I was incredibly grateful for the advice and support that came from a highly supportive female friend and colleague who informally 'inducted' me into the school during my early years. Despite being in a minority, my experience as a research assistant was positive, thanks to my supervisor and colleagues, although I was startled by the contrasting experiences of some of my counterparts, which gave me an early insight into the way that power could be exerted.

Like others, I was fortunate to benefit from a Cardiff scheme that enabled research assistants to become research associates, complete papers and undertake teaching experience. From here, I applied through open competition for a fixed-term lectureship post, and then to another competitive round to become permanent. I was promoted to senior lecturer a few years later, despite some hiccups that many of us experience within the process, and it was at this point that I began to take on leadership roles[1]. As my colleagues will confirm, I have never been hesitant in offering an opinion on how things could improve (!) and believe that we all need to step up and try to make change. No doubt this approach led to me being labelled 'difficult' or 'challenging' as others will have experienced too.

It was at this early point that I joined our Equality and Diversity Committee, which I would later chair, and where I co-led a *Gender Review of Academic Employment at Cardiff Business School*, with an inspirational female economist. The review outcomes revealed the typical 'scissor' pattern where women out-perform and out-number their male counterparts at Bachelors, Masters and PhD level. These patterns were reversed when we examined the academic hierarchy with the 'leaky pipeline' in full flow until we reached the inevitable chasm when looking at our professoriate. At the time just one of Cardiff's 57 business school professors was female.

This analysis was accompanied by a staff survey which showed a high degree of commonality between men and women academics but there was a statistically significant difference on one key question. We asked respondents which work activities – teaching, research, academic leadership, citizenship – were the most important priorities for them and it was here that opinion was divided, with most male colleagues identifying research as the key priority and most women respondents rating all activities equally, signalling an all-round academic contribution. These findings, which have been widely reinforced in successive studies (see Galizzi, McBride and Siboni, 2024, for a recent example), confirmed that we needed to challenge the dominant notion of the 'ideal academic', predicated on an out-moded stereotype (Ryan and Morgenroth, 2024) and encourage more diversity in academic leadership teams.

[1] I follow Cathy Cassell (2024) here in using the term 'academic leadership', rather than 'service' or 'administration'.

Making the case for the 'rounded academic'

Relaying these findings to male colleagues in senior leadership positions was not the easiest task but the dean was supportive and the review was widely disseminated within and beyond Cardiff. We developed a strategy to improve representation and instigated a new process for academic leadership appointments. Besides underscoring issues of inequality at an early point in my career, the review was a significant piece of work and my publication rate slowed during this period. I argued that, in addition to my research outputs, grants and teaching, the review constituted a very significant contribution and persisted with an application to reader which was successful. I know I would have progressed more rapidly had I prioritised research, which accords with studies that highlight the 'unseen (and unrewarded) labour' involved in leading these kinds of initiatives and the 'downsides' of developing a more rounded profile (Yarrow and Johnston, 2022: 13).

I am hopeful that these kinds of contributions would be better recognised today but as a community that professes leadership, we should be more proactive in ensuring those who step up to improve processes, practices, and performance receive the recognition they deserve. This means challenging the 'publishing at all costs' mindset and, as Bothello and Roulet argue (2019: 860), encouraging a culture where we 'act less like mercenaries and more like public intellectuals'. But this is only possible if business schools promote and reward a rounded contribution.

Public Value and trying to 'walk the talk'

The next phase of my career coincided with the development of a new Public Value-oriented and purpose-driven strategy at Cardiff Business School. Public Value was brought to the fore by Mark Moore (1997) with a driving impetus to 'create value for the common good' (Grace and Thorogood, 2023). Seen as an advance on related concepts of 'public good' or 'public interest', it focuses on value creation as opposed to the safeguarding of interests. Public Value, it is argued, subsumes the impact of wider negative externalities, emphasises outcomes rather than outputs, and focuses on the co-creation of what communities themselves value, as opposed to adopting organisational assumptions of what communities might need (Alford and O'Flynn, 2008). Public Value's democratic credentials were appealing to Cardiff's former dean Martin Kitchener when he was considering its potential application to a business school context. So, after much deliberation and discussion with our internal and external stakeholders, we began to hone a strong sense of purpose based on *the co-creation of high-quality interdisciplinary education and research oriented to Grand Challenges delivering social, environmental and economic value*.

In 2014, just ahead of the formal launch of the new Public Value strategy, the school created a new committee - the Shadow Management Board (SMB). The board was designed so we could 'walk the talk' on good governance (one of our five Grand Challenges), inject some 'blue skies' thinking, and provide critical friendship to the formal School Management Board. The aim was for the board to be representative of the school, in terms of protected characteristics and the workplace hierarchy. I was appointed as the inaugural Chair of SMB which gave me a chance to put my research expertise on accountability and governance into practice and an opportunity to collaborate with a committed and diverse set of colleagues. Together we produced a series of action-oriented reports, including on the school's postgraduate portfolio and dignity and respect in work and study. I also worked closely with the dean which gave me a peek into the weird and wonderful world of business school leadership. SMB was both an 'eye-opener' and a springboard, with SMB graduates, including many women, moving on to hold senior leadership positions.

Progression and the imposter syndrome

Shortly after becoming chair of SMB, I gained promotion to Personal Chair. This was a pivotal moment and one where my imposter syndrome shot into the stratosphere. When applying for promotion, I was less concerned with meeting the University's benchmarks and more focused on whether I would gain the moral and professional legitimacy required to be a professor from my colleagues and from the wider professorial community. It was important that I was promoted for a rounded contribution across all areas - I did not want to be someone who traded her teaching for research or failed to be a good citizen. It was vital to be credible and I recall the anxiety when colleagues later read my promotion application and commented 'I hadn't realised you had done so much', which I immediately interpreted as a sign that they had been questioning why I had been promoted.

It took me some time to realise that we all experience these isolating and anxious moments of self-doubt. Imposter syndrome is as good a term as any to describe this feeling and over time I have learned to recognise and accept it on the basis that it applies to us all, and certainly not just to women. These doubts are natural, as we will always find ourselves in new situations feeling somewhat out of our depth, but we also need to be careful not to overplay them. This can encourage organisations to adopt a 'fix the person' approach to reducing inequality which can distract us from taking action to tackle the root causes and the systemic conditions that reinforce impostor syndrome, especially for Early Career Researchers ((Ryan and Morgenroth, 2024; Bothello and Roulet, 2019).

Decision-making and role models

After chairing SMB for a couple of years, a vacancy came up for the position of Head of the Management, Employment and Organisation Section– a large group of world-leading organisation, employment and public management scholars. I had been encouraged towards this position previously but felt it was not the right time for me or the school. I have often experienced a sense of uncertainty and reluctance about leadership positions and over time I have come to recognise that if this is due to a lack of faith in myself, it can be overcome. On the other hand, if there is a bad 'gut feeling' and sense of dread, the answer should be 'no' even if this disappoints colleagues.

By 2016 my position had altered, mainly because of my promotion to professor but also due to my experience on SMB, so I applied and was appointed as the Head of Section. This gave me an insight into the array of achievements colleagues were making which invoked a huge sense of pride, but also an understanding of their various lived experiences and different motivations, along with some of the challenging circumstances that lay beneath the surface. Senior colleagues can often be nervous about the 'people' dimension of academic leadership but I would encourage greater confidence with this aspect. Bearing witness to the contributions being made by so many 'rounded academics' and having the chance to support this fantastic group of colleagues was one of the privileges of my career. It also gave me a seat at the Management Board and an understanding of University HR processes and their counter-effects.

In 2018 the University began its search for the next business school dean. I was entirely happy in my position as Head of Section and had not contemplated the prospect of progressing any further. After all, as Cathy Cassell (2024) observes, these are not positions we dream of as little girls. As the weeks went by, colleagues began to seek me out to ask if I was considering an application for the position, to which my immediate thought was 'why are they asking me?'. By this time, our Public Value strategy was in its first few years of implementation

and some exciting things were happening. A crowd-sourcing process identified five broad and inclusive Grand Challenges – decent work, fair and sustainable economies, future organisations, good governance and responsible innovation - and we had introduced some innovative support mechanisms, such as our Public Value Engagement Fellowships.

The argument from colleagues was that we were building something distinctive at Cardiff and that I understood this and could help to sustain it. Plus, I knew the School 'inside out' and had a good understanding of people. If I am honest, I was unsure about whether I could do the job at this point but I wasn't experiencing that feeling of dread either so I decided to make an application. My colleagues had a significant influence on my decision by giving me clear examples of the experiences and skills they felt I could bring. They helped to instil a belief that with their support I could do the job and I will be eternally grateful for their encouragement.

One problem I encountered when thinking about the Head of Section or dean role was the difficulty of visualising a woman in these positions. No woman had occupied either of these roles and we had very few women deans across the sector which made me doubt that I could ever attain these positions. At this point I was fortunate to secure 'warts and all' advice from a woman mentor in the University who held a senior role. Her recommendation was that I could be a good dean if I was fair, human and compassionate and 'told it how it is'. I kept a note of this important advice on my desk and have tried my best to follow it.

I was appointed as dean in 2018 and from that point on I became a role model for women, whether I liked it or not. The most frequent comment from my female colleagues was 'we never thought we would see this day' and six years on from being appointed a woman dean continues to be remarked on by job candidates, our students and even conference delegates from other business schools. When International Women's Day comes around, I still receive messages from my female colleagues thanking me for being in the role. However, my appointment also took me back to the very early days at the Business School in the 1990s when I was in a clear minority. For example, a common experience as a Head of School was meeting with 23 other Heads of School and the Vice Chancellor, as the lone female in rooms festooned with portraits of eminent former (male) Vice Chancellors and Chairs of Council.

The paucity of role models is a significant factor in explaining under-representation of minority groups in academic leadership and is highlighted in countless studies, including recent research on women in leadership in higher education (see Khan *et al.*, 2024) and the wider economy (Ryan and Morgenroth, 2024). It is also spotlighted in Cathy Cassell's recent article (2024) where she reflects on the way that business school leadership positions are depicted as a 'miserable career option' (2) and bemoans the way that deans themselves 'talk down' the role. Like Cathy, I have spent much of my time debunking 'dean myths' focusing instead on the platform we are given to be 'loud and proud' about the unique set of social, environmental and economic contributions that only business schools can make.

Public Value in action - creating value for the common good

As a woman dean I knew I would be providing 'symbolic' or 'descriptive' gender representation but I wanted to try and deliver something more substantive. With our Public Value strategy in mind and the need to 'walk the talk' on this, I took personal responsibility for people, equality and inclusion which gave me the chance to put my equality research into practice and work closely with a wise and capable ED&I Officer to

implement Reasonable Adjustments, Returners Leave and Interim Flexible Working policies. I chaired our People Committee too so I could hear the lived experiences of our staff and students at first-hand, in addition to our school recruitment panels and school-based Promotions Committee.

Keen to implement recommendations from our research, and especially studies conducted by my colleagues during Covid, we established a Race Equality Committee and appointed a Race Equality Project Officer; set out our ambition to become an anti-racist school; launched an anti-racism development programme for all staff; and made changes to our role descriptions and recruitment practices for professional services and academic staff. There is still an awful long way to go but enhancing our understanding along the way has been important. As Roseberry *et al.* (2016) underline, personal commitment is just not enough - we need to be proactive and directly engaged to make change.

We wanted to address our education portfolio in light of Public Value and so we implemented a postgraduate programme review. Among other changes, this included moving from a pre-experience MBA to a new interdisciplinary, post-experience, Public Value-oriented MBA, accompanied by a new MSc in Business Management. This was a major shift for the school and along with the subsequent AMBA accreditation we attained, it sent a strong signal to the external community. We thought carefully about how Public Value was conveyed to the outside world too, investing in a major campaign called 'I Stand For' based on interviews with students, colleagues and stakeholders, reflecting the issues they were passionate about, such as fairness, humanity, sustainability, and responsibility. These campaigns are live and continue to generate important statements that reflect staff and student priorities.

Finally, being in a business school places you in a powerful position as an advocate for others, and especially so when you are the dean. I was always mindful that at its core Public Value means *creating value for the common good*. At Cardiff this meant being explicit about what we need to change to secure fair, equal and sustainable economies and societies. We have been keen to promote the business school as a force for good and been vocal about what needs to change, based on our evidence. This involves being proactive as an anchor institution in our city, more visible within our own national and international networks and societies, and more explicit in our interactions with global, national and local business organisations, governments and policy-makers.

In my first week as dean, I heard the local council leader reference a 12-year life expectancy gap between north and south Cardiff. This has encouraged the school and wider University to take on a mission of widening access to education and employment with good terms and conditions. I was pleased to contribute to this by being appointed a UK Living Wage Commissioner and chairing the Social Care Fair Work Forum for Wales. Besides learning, collaborating and valuing a collective sense of endeavour, it has been important for me to be proactive on Public Value initiatives, both internally and externally. Again, this is reflective of the 'rounded academic' archetype and hopefully it encourages others to prioritise these kinds of activities.

The tedium of everyday sexism

Like many of my fellow colleagues, I can identify with the 'death by a million cuts' analogy that Andrea Prothero deploys in her essay on Patriarchy and the Business School (2023:1) and I would not be able to provide a faithful account of my career from research assistant to dean without noting examples of incidents that could be classed as 'everyday sexism' and reflect a gender bias, whether conscious or unconscious. These can be traced back to the early stages of my career when I experienced predatory behaviour from a male colleague, which was frequently observed by others yet no-one acted. When I reported this, I was advised to inform the colleague that I had a boyfriend which eventually dissuaded him from harassing me, but did not arrest the behaviour, which continued with other staff members.

When presenting to senior colleagues over the years I have often received feedback on my outfits, rather than engagement with the substance of my talk. I have had research that I have published in leading journals very helpfully 'mansplained' back to me by my colleagues. In panel sessions and meetings male counterparts are often referred to by their professorial titles when I am not, while academic and practitioner colleagues, including those within international delegations, frequently assume that one of my male colleagues is the dean of the business school rather than me. And inevitably I have encountered various situations related to salaries over the years, such as when, early in my career I drew a comparison with a male colleague only to be told he was married with children and therefore had more responsibilities to fulfil than me. We will return to some of these themes in the next section.

The future

a) Begin to value what we know

The Public Value activity at Cardiff has been underpinned by what we know based on our research and our Grand Challenges reflect the breadth of that expertise. While much of what we know is published in 'world-leading' journals, some of what we know has been published elsewhere, in a wider range of journals or reports, often because our leading journals do not always make the best homes for radical, cutting-edge, challenge-oriented research. In addition, academic colleagues produce different types of research for different audiences, all of which are valuable in enabling them to deliver Public Value.

Equality proves a good case in point. We have a significant body of theory, evidence and practice at our fingertips, yet we are failing to maximise the benefits. Research with colleagues on equality mainstreaming advocates a series of facilitative conditions that could support universities to become more gender-equal organisations, for example (Parken and Ashworth, 2019) but universities, and often business schools themselves, tend to undervalue

this kind of expertise. The need for greater equality and inclusion remains one of the grand challenges of our time, yet we still hear of ED&I-focused journals being marginalised within business schools, often being described as 'niche'. As one of my esteemed colleagues has commented, it was not one of his many 4* articles on ED&I that secured meaningful change but a report he wrote during COVID-19. Business schools ignore these significant studies at their peril, wherever they are published.

b) Mainstreaming the 'rounded academic' archetype

Scholars in our schools have spent decades critiquing the concept of the 'ideal worker', yet we have created our own system oriented around the 'ideal academic' which remains heavily associated with a publication-driven performance culture. There are at least two major negatives associated with this position.

First, it means we have failed to adapt to meet contemporary societal expectations of business schools and universities (Thomas and Ambrosini, 2021). Governments, communities and wider stakeholders now expect us to generate value for the common good and this cannot be achieved by segregating colleagues into siloed positions with some publishing in an increasingly narrow range of 'leading' journals, while others are being oriented towards education, and 'impact' is seen as the sole responsibility of those engaged in so-called 'practice' research (Kitchener, Levitt and Thomas, 2022). Expectations of business schools (and universities) have changed and we will struggle to survive if we fail to meet stakeholder expectations and promote a more rounded academic contribution.

The second consequence is that we have become convinced that the solution to inequalities lies in confidence-building style interventions designed to enable colleagues to 'match up' to the 'ideal academic'. This has produced a plethora of leadership development programmes, promotion bootcamps, and resilience sessions that have failed to deliver greater equality (Ryan and Morgenroth, 2024). External accreditation systems, such as Athena Swan offer important learning benefits in allowing us to better understand our data and specific drivers of inequality but can be counter-productive if they result in a 'glossing over' of the issues (Yarrow and Johnston, 2021). If we are bold enough here, there is an opportunity for business school accreditation bodies to help us promote an alternative approach linked to the rounded academic via a system that is underpinned by something more substantial than pragmatic legitimacy

c) Acting on our agency

Our understanding of people and organisations highlights the role of agency and the potential to make change. Yes, we operate within parent university structures and there are constraints, but we can still innovate in this environment. For example, Cardiff University recently removed the requirement to include teaching evaluations in promotion after we made an evidence-based representation highlighting bias and discrimination, while locally, we have been able to pilot, explore and trial research-led initiatives in the business school to see what works. Each business school will have its own examples but for us this has meant the introduction of Quiet Fridays, along with Wellbeing Days around key holiday periods to enable all our colleagues to work from home and ease into the vacation. There is much more for us to do but business schools can easily be first movers on equality actions, providing important learning for ourselves, our parent institutions and each other.

One area where we have agency is when it comes to representation within our community. Research has reinforced the significance of role models, firmly underlining the point that 'if you can't see it, you can't be it'. It may take some time to address representation in key leadership positions but in the meantime, we can try and ensure that the diversity in our community is reflected in the composition of our Association Boards, as well as in our events programmes, and challenge a lack of balance wherever it exists. Too many of our associations continue to deliver conferences with homogenous sets of speakers and this needs to change. We have some good practice to work from here, such as the Inclusive Events Guide developed by Essex Business School which has been adopted by CABS and BAM in the UK and we will need colleagues to decline positions on platforms to create space for others. This is an important responsibility that we must all embrace if we want to see a more diverse set of contributions from within and across our business schools.

Dignity, reach and respect

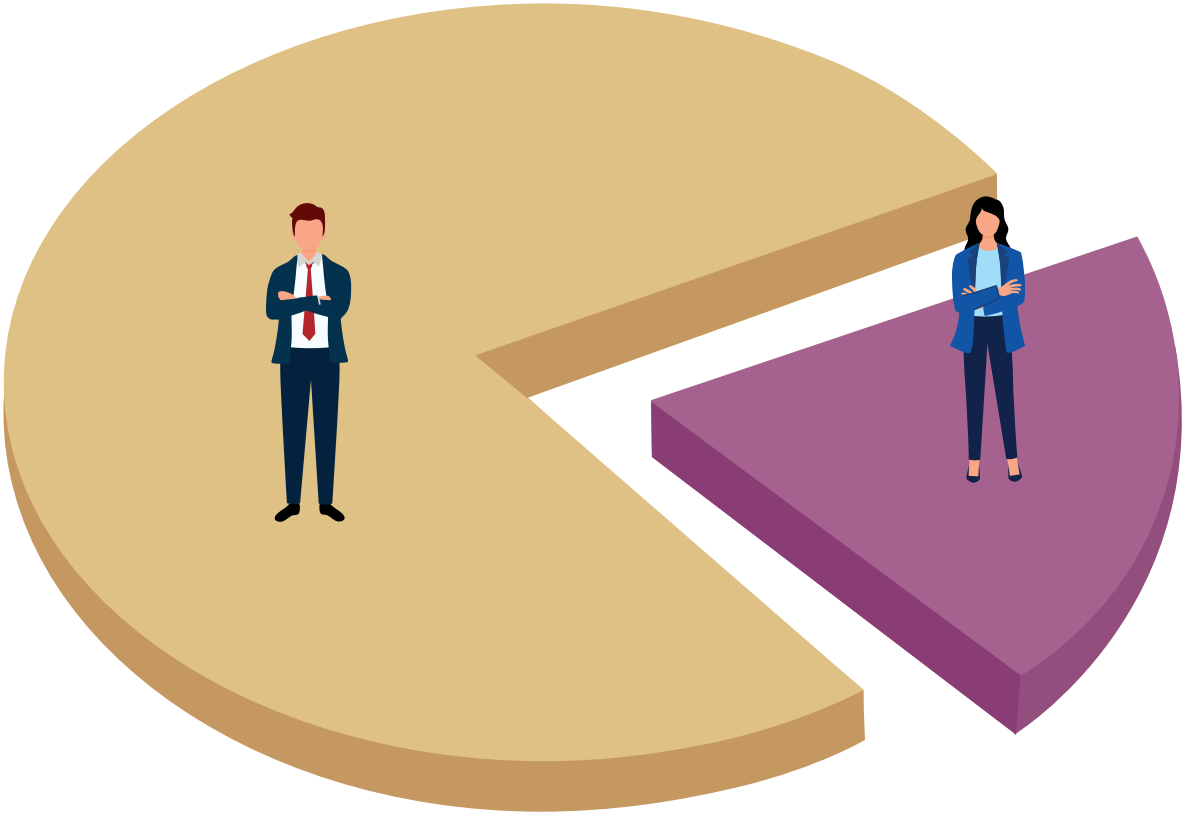
Business school research has relayed the cumulative and painful damage that occurs when we experience discrimination and micro-aggressions on a continual basis. We all need to become sufficiently emboldened to call out these day-to-day situations and be especially mindful of toxic intersectional interactive effects and impacts too. Similarly, business school scholars have written widely on the importance of dignity and respect and the need for these important human rights to be enforced within organisations. Yet to date, we have mostly been happy to leave these issues to be addressed by our parent universities, often via compulsory mandatory training sessions.

School-level investment in continuous professional development that encourages allyship and promotes useful intervention techniques can be helpful here, and we should do as much as we can to promote engagement with this kind of training, both within our schools and more widely in our membership associations. As deans we need to take any and every opportunity we can to talk with colleagues and understand their lived experiences so we can respond to suggestions on what will help. I am conscious that I have relayed my experiences in this article, yet no-one, save for several fellow women academics, has ever asked me about my career reflections. Our initiatives will only be effective and impactful if we all have a better understanding of (gender) equality (Gooty *et al.*, 2023).

Conclusion

There have been some important improvements in equality in business schools since I became a research assistant in 1995. 26% of our professors at Cardiff are women and I would never have imagined that I would become the dean of my school one day. Nevertheless, our more negative sectoral traits remain, including the persistent orientation toward narrow, market-driven research and an obsession with journal metrics, world rankings and accreditation (Kitchener and Delbridge, 2019). As Roseberry *et al.*, (2016:12) emphasise, 'chilly climates, work/family conflicts and authorship distribution continue to disadvantage female academics career potential' and so there is still work to do to address what is too often experienced as an unequal and 'inhumane' academy (Korica, 2024).

We have struggled to reduce discrimination and ensure better representation because we are nested within the same persistent societal and economic structures that serve to sustain inequalities more widely across organisations, communities and societies. The recent race riots in the UK have provided a sharp reminder of this. Nevertheless, at Cardiff, our Public Value strategy has emboldened us to try and promote change armed with expertise, evidence and agency. However, trying to 'walk the talk' is vital – we cannot promote change externally while failing to try and get our own house in order. If business schools are bold enough to value and promote Public Value-type research and engagement, fully embrace the concept of the rounded academic, and lead a shift away from the 'publish or perish' culture, we may have a fighting chance of addressing inequality and other global challenges that persist within and beyond our business schools.



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