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WOMEN STAFF IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a study which aimed to identify equity issues in the working lives of women staff in a New Zealand university business school. A participatory action research methodology was adopted which includes several stages. This paper reports on the first two: focus groups and a survey. The findings suggest that over-work and lack of community are key issues. Some women feel disadvantaged in relation to male colleagues, while others reject this notion. The paper links challenges in carrying out the research to the findings themselves. Distinctive features of the project are the emphasis on overall quality of work life and the inclusion of all women staff (general/professional and academic).

Keywords: Women; universities; academic staff; professional staff; equal opportunities; chilly climate; participatory action research

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an exploratory study of the work experiences of women staff in the business school of a New Zealand university. We discuss the research process in detail, as well as the findings, explaining how claims about potential issues of inequality are inseparable from the political sensitivities of the research process. In this study, these sensitivities were exacerbated by our research strategy: we used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach by which we investigated not only our own occupation as academic women, but, more specifically, our own workplace. Our objectives for this working paper are both to engage with colleagues and to contribute to the wider literature of work and gender.

There is a well-established body of research on equity issues for academic women in Western countries, addressing a wide range of explanations for persistent and seemingly intractable patterns of inequality. The writers of a recent large-scale study have argued that 'overt discrimination has largely given way to less obvious but still deeply entrenched inequities' (Monroe, Ozyart, Wrigley & Alexander 2008: 215). Others argue that increased managerialism in neoliberal universities, and research audit regimes, have intensified unequal outcomes for women (Baker, 2009). While statistical data can tell a useful story of unequal outcomes, and is often most credible to managers and policy-makers, further understandings of inequality require in-depth understanding derived from specific case studies such as ours. Hence, in our study we explore the quality of working life, not just the comparative progress of women up the hierarchy. Our study is unusual because we consider all women staff, both general staff and academic women, and, where possible, casual staff. We also aim to identify issues that are specific to business schools.

Our overall research question asks: What are the key equity issues for women staff in university business schools? Our objectives are (1) To investigate equity issues for women staff in university business schools, using our own faculty as a case study; (2) To take a participatory action research approach which will lead to organisational change. The study is designed to include several phases including targeted focus group research; the design, circulation and analysis of a survey; design of a change intervention; and final evaluation of the change.

This working paper covers our research process and findings up to the end of data collection and analysis. We start with an overview of the extensive literature on women in universities, focussing on the key issues that guided our research design. We then give a brief outline of the more specific situation of women in New Zealand universities, including our own. The research process itself is a central focus of this paper. We faced unexpected

challenges in the data collection process, and we explore the implications of this. We also present the three key issues raised by participants. Finally, we review the implications of our findings for our own study and in terms of future research on women in business schools, and in universities generally.

WOMEN, WORK AND UNIVERSITIES

Our study differs from most research on women in universities. Rather than focussing primarily on the 'glass ceiling' that prevents women from achieving senior positions (Kjeldal, Rindfleish, & Sheridan, 2004), we are interested in the overall quality of working life for women in universities. We draw on Joan Acker's concept of a 'regime of inequality' (Acker, 2006a, 2006b), a heuristic framework which looks at the 'patterning of gender processes' (Acker, 2006a:195) in a given organisational unit, within its social context.

Academic women are a group of highly privileged women who provide an example of both the limitations and the successes of typical equal opportunities policies (Jones & Torrie, 2009). Further improvements are undermined by a common perception that equality goals have been achieved or are 'in the pipeline' (Allen & Castleman, 2001). Overt discrimination is rare (although not absent Monroe, et al., 2008). Current research addresses systemic gendered processes which 'produce gendered universities, where gender becomes embedded in organizations' processes and practices. Once it is embedded, producing gender anew requires no conscious conspiracies or planning but simply the regular operation of standard operating procedures.'(Roos, 2008:187). More recently, local and international studies have argued that increased managerialism in universities, and specifically PBRF-style research audit regimes, with increased workload pressure, have intensified unequal outcomes for women, partly because they tend to see themselves, and also to be seen, as more committed to 'family responsibilities', including childbearing itself (Baker, 2010b).

'Glass ceiling' research seeks to document and to explain why there are not equal numbers of women in top university jobs, given the presence of equal opportunities policies. Much of this work circles around promotion rates and processes (Chesmart, Ross-Smith & Peters, 2005; Jones & Torrie, 2009). The concept of 'chilly climate' (Prentice, 2000) was developed in an attempt to explain the 'ubiquitous and insidious problem of subtle and unconscious sexism impacting daily life, work distribution, student evaluations, and promotion and hiring decisions' (Freyd & Johnson, 2010). The concept of 'chilly climate' can also be used to explore the quality of working life in its own right, as we have done here. Issues identified in 'chilly climate' research include lack of encouragement and recognition for women staff, and reduced

confidence (Baker, 2010b; Jones & Torrie, 2009). 'Chilly climate' reduces women's 'voice', defined as the opportunity to express ideas, to be listened to with respect, and potentially to make a difference (Milliken & Morrison, 2003). Studies by Cooper et al. (Cooper, Benham, Collay, Martinez-Aleman & Scherr, 1999; Cooper & Strachan, 2006) have described women as looking for a sense of 'home' or 'welcome ground' to counter 'chilly climate'. In our analysis we have used the wider term 'community' to include this idea and other issues grouped under 'chilly climate'. Research on 'chilly climate' has often been the centre of 'practical and political struggles [in universities] over how to define equality, how to attribute responsibility, and how to prove and remedy discrimination' (Prentice, 2000: 195). As Bird (2011) has argued, university management tends to seek 'women-centred' explanations for gender disparities based on fixing or improving women: this deficit model focuses on changing women, not university systems. Typical programmes (as in our university) include mentoring, leadership programmes, and promotion workshops.

There are relatively few studies of women staff in business schools. Most echo the wider literature on academic women, showing that despite the increasing levels of women enrolled in business-related majors, women are still under-represented at senior level positions (Falkenberg, 2003) and are paid less than their male colleagues (Robinson & Monks, 1999). At all levels, they have reported examples of overt discrimination and a 'chilly climate' (Lanier, Tanner, & Guidry, 2009). A trend within the literature is the assumption that business departments tend to be more conservative than others, especially in specific areas where there are few women (e.g. in economics, Ginther & Kahn, 2004). Some researchers argue that there is a connection between the absence of women at senior level positions and a lack of support networks (Hukai & Li, 2009) or of female role models within these departments (Sinclair, 1997). Others argue that AACSB certification process in business schools adds to the pressure of research audits which negatively impacts on women in particular (Lightbody, 2010). Fotaki (2011) argues that not only do 'traditional' gender inequalities persist, but that business schools are 'complicit in perpetuating the failure of 'diversity management' as they undermine the very practices they ostensibly teach' (p. 9). More optimistically, McTiernan and Flynn (2011) argue that a new cohort of women deans is on the horizon in American business schools, and Bell (2011) believes this change could lead to greater diversity in business schools.

Most of the research refers to permanently employed academic women. However, women in universities are more likely than men to work in what researchers have called the 'ivory basement'. This is defined by some researchers as including both lower-paid general staff jobs

and short-term academic contracts (Eveline & Booth, 2004). In this study we will define the 'academic ivory basement', as comprising academics or aspiring academics on temporary or part-time contracts. This includes, for instance, tutors and research assistants. These forms of employment have serious consequences for women in terms of research production, promotions (Bryson, 2004) and job satisfaction (Toutkoushian & Bellas, 2003). In recent times this situation has been exacerbated by the greater use in universities of short-term contracts.

Relatively little research has been carried out on general staff women. As Eveline and Booth (2004:246) have argued, 'despite a rhetoric of collegiality, universities have a long history of status hierarchy, with senior academics at the top and secretaries, cleaners and casual tutors in the basement'. In comparison with academic women, where inequality is often measured by comparative status within the same hierarchy, the situation of general staff in universities presents an example of occupational segregation, where women are clustered in lower-status and lower-paid occupations. During our study we were alerted by participants to a partial shift from the term 'general' to that of 'professional' staff, to describe university staff in our institution who are not in traditional 'academic' positions. This shift is partly associated with the emergence of new roles in the managerial university, such as 'research administrators' who organise the new audit regimes (Collinson, 2006:268). Szekeres (2004) has argued that the confusion in terminology about administrative staff is a function of their marginalisation and invisibility, while Mabokela (2003) describes even relatively senior administrators as the 'donkeys of the university' who work hard without fair recognition or reward.

GENDER IN NEW ZEALAND UNIVERSITIES

New Zealand universities share the neoliberal policy and practices developed in Western universities over the last decade or so, and the gender pattern is similar to those described in the international literature (Baker, 2009). The research typically emphasizes the key role of government intervention in terms of equal opportunities laws and policies (Jones & Torrie, 2009). Equal opportunities are focused around getting women into senior positions as the index of their success. Data from university calendars shows the proportion of women in senior academic positions (Associate Professor and Professor) as 22.45% overall in 2010, up 6.63% from 2003 (HRC, 2010a:83). Our own university ranks 4th of 8 New Zealand universities, with 23.25% women in senior academic positions (HRC, 2010a: 85). The Human Rights Commission attributes this improvement partly to the New Zealand Women in Leadership (NZWIL) programmes run for academic and for senior general staff since 2007 (HRC, 2010a: 84). There are several such 'woman-centred' institutional programmes based on leadership and

mentoring (Harper & Sawicka, 2001). There is no other national standardized system that reports equity progress, so that equity within academic institutions cannot be compared and the data collected cannot be thoroughly analysed (Jones & Torrie, 2004; Neale, 2005).

	Accounting Comm. Law		**Economics & Finance**		**Government**		**Information Management**		**Marketing International Business**		**Management**		**Total Business faculty**	
Position	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**
Professor	4	2	5	1	2	2	3	2	3	0	6	1	23	8
Adjunct Prof.	3	1	3	0	0	1	1	1			2	0	9	2
Assoc. Prof.	2	1	6	0	4	1	2	1	0	1	4	3	18	7
Senior Lecturer	8	6	8	0	3	3	11	7	4	0	9	4	43	20
Lecturer	4	1	4	2			2	0	2	3	0	2	12	8
Assistant Lecturer	0	2											0	2
Totals	**21**	**13**	**26**	**3**	**9**	**7**	**19**	**11**	**9**	**4**	**21**	**10**	**105**	**47**

Table 1: Academic staff by gender by department in case study business school, based on calendar entries, 2001. (M= Male, F= Female)

Statistics in our own business school (terminology varies, but our own ‘school’ unit is called a ‘faculty’) show that this is traditionally a male-dominated environment, into which academic women have slowly entered (Table 1 above). University calendar data shows that in 1958 there were no female academic staff. By 1983 there were 9 out of a total of 82 staff (11%), and by 2001 there were 34 out of 89 (38%). Currently there are 47 women out of 105 staff (44%), similar to recent USA figures (Lanier, Tanner & Guidry, 2009). Ranking shows a typical gender hierarchy: senior academics are 48 men and 13 women (27%). (If Adjuncts are included, the figures shift to 57 men and 15 women (26%)). Women are 20 out of 63 Senior Lecturers (46%); 8 out of 20 Lecturers (40%); and 100% of Assistant Lecturers (2). There are also the variations within disciplines: notably, there are very few women in the economic and finance field (Ginther & Kahn, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

Participatory Action Research

This project was born out of the Faculty Equity Advisory Committee, of which three of us were originally members. Following various informal conversations regarding the equity issues facing women within our school, we decided to collaborate on a project to more fully explore the subject. In undertaking this project we hoped to contribute to practical positive change as well as to locate our findings within the broader academic literature.

While we draw on our own pre-understandings as academic women, we considered it important to open up the conversation to a range of voices. We wanted our inquiry to be as open as possible, given the stated research objectives. We intended that potential research participants would have input into the design of the research process, and also that we would consult them for advice as we proceeded. Hence the methodology we adopted was Participatory Action Research (PAR), a form of emergent inquiry process where both participants and researchers generate knowledge through an evolving democratic process (Levin & Greenwood, 2008). It involves collaborative dialogue, the involvement and representation of all relevant parties (Ryan & De Stefano, 2000) and a focus on what people in the organization identify as pressing problems (Levin & Greenwood, 2008). It aims to develop practical knowledge as a means of addressing problematic issues while simultaneously empowering individuals and their communities (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire, 2003).

The research itself was centred on a typical action research cycle of identifying issues, planning and carrying out an intervention, and evaluating the outcomes. It was conceived as having a number of stages: first, focus groups; second, a survey, informed by the focus groups; third, an intervention in the form of an organizational change; and fourth and finally, a follow-up survey to evaluate the change. PAR projects vary to the extent that participants have a role in designing the process. In our case we set the initial research objectives, the focus group helped to guide the survey design. We also initiated and consulted an advisory group comprising of a range of women from the business school, representative of different roles. This working paper reports on the focus groups and the survey stage of the project. In the next cycle we will share findings, seek feedback and plan for another research cycle.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were organised. Two of these were comprised of academic staff, one of professional/general staff, and one of casual contract (academic ‘ivory basement’) staff.

Suitable participants were selected by a variety of processes, including searching the university website and the researchers' networks. The decision to use focus groups was consistent with the participatory ethos of the project. Focus groups can be, in and of themselves, an intervention; not just a tool for canvassing the views of the participants but also a means of encouraging dialogue and reflection by the participants with a goal of empowerment (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). The process which we adopted in arranging the focus groups reflected our desire to be inclusive and to avoid imposing our own views upon the participants. The emphasis on inclusiveness was reflected in the decision to include representatives of all women staff: academic, general/professional, and academic 'ivory basement'. It was decided that separate groups for each category would encourage a frank and free exchange of views, and help to identify distinctive issues for each group. But we acknowledge that differences in seniority and power may potentially operate as a constraining factor, even within role-specific groups.

We found it hard to recruit participants for the focus groups. This possibly reflects the many work demands on potential participants. We struggled in particular to find participants for the academic 'ivory basement' group. They were hard to locate and possibly felt more on the margins of the organisation. Those who ultimately agreed to commit the time to participate in the focus groups may have been more interested in equity issues than others in the potential sample. Focus groups can have limitations in terms of their use in assessing general attitudes, as those who chose not to participate may hold different perspectives (Viscek 2010).

Discussion was facilitated by the university mediator, who is male and works outside of the school. We reflected carefully on whether this choice was appropriate, and decided to proceed on the grounds that we wanted to set a tone that was positive, constructive and neutral. Each focus group took approximately 60 minutes. They were held in a meeting room with coffee provided as an aid to creating a relaxed environment. The facilitator followed a similar approach for each group. Before the questions were discussed there was a general introduction and confidentiality agreements were signed by all participants. Two of the researchers observed the focus groups but did not participate. Discussions were recorded and later transcribed. Focus group questions are listed below.

1. What do you like the most about your current job?
2. What would help you to enjoy your work more?
3. What would help you achieve your personal goals for your working life?
4. What would assist you to achieve a better work/life balance?
5. What do you think are the issues that particularly affect women working here?
6. What topics would you like to see included in the survey we are planning for women in [our faculty]?
7. What is the most important change that you think could be made in the university that you think would improve the quality of your working life?

Table 2: Focus Group Questions

The focus groups began with the question 'What do you like the most about your current job?' This beginning was modelled upon the approach used in the National Conversation about Work (HRC, 2010b) and intended to set a constructive and open tone to the proceedings. Other questions aimed at focusing on overall qualities of working life, rather than prioritising glass ceilings and assuming 'career' thinking. We took pains to avoid the term 'career' after potential participants mentioned to researchers that they did not see themselves as eligible because they did not plan to have a 'career' (See in particular Q 2, 3, 4 and 7). Our desire to contribute constructively to organisational change was explicitly reflected in questions which prompted participants to think about changes the university could make to improve working life in general (Q 2,3 4, and 7). The focus groups were also intended as a way for participants to actively shape the research: they were asked to identify issues that concerned them and women in the faculty generally (Q. 5). They were also given the opportunity to provide input into the survey design (Q 6).

Survey

The objectives of the survey were to canvas responses from a wider range of participants, and to follow up in greater depth the issues raised in focus groups. We carried out a preliminary analysis of the focus group discussions, and some new issues raised by participants were included. These included, for instance, specific questions about committee work. Some focus group participants believed that women were more likely than men to be involved in time-

consuming committees, and indicated the desire to follow up this issue. A number of women raised issues of community and belonging, so survey questions were designed to prompt participants to discuss whether it was important for them to have a sense of community in the workplace, and how community could be implemented within the school.

The survey tool was a self-administered questionnaire. It was designed to be anonymous, after early feedback made clear that confidentiality was not strong enough to address the concerns of possible participants. The questionnaire was paper-based (although it could be distributed electronically) and divided into several sections. The questionnaire was intended to canvass the concepts and ideas that had been identified through the literature review and focus groups. Nearly all questions were open-ended and prompted respondents to write about their own personal situations. The questionnaire consisted of five main sections: 1) 'You and your aspirations' 2) 'Organisational climate', 3) 'Work and life outside work' 4) 'Working at the university' and 5) 'Demographic questions about you'. Some of the sections also contained Likert or ranking scales, such as organization climate. Demographic and work history questions were included so that we could compare types of respondents, and also explore the pathways that mid-career practitioners take in to becoming business academics. Questionnaire pilot testing was undertaken first within the research advisory group and then among four women who had similar attributes to the target respondent group. The women who tested the survey commented that they found it long (it took over 30 minutes to complete), but we felt it critical that the salient issues identified in the literature and focus groups be included to obtain a comprehensive picture of a complex area.

All female staff who met the inclusion criteria for the study (141) were invited to contribute. In addition surveys were sent to the advisory team, to those who had been involved in focus groups, and the researchers themselves (27). This lead to a possible respondent pool of 168 permanent staff. It was impossible to determine the number of further potential academic 'ivory basement' staff . Tutors and research assistants are not included in staff contact lists, so we contacted head tutors, course co-ordinators and senior administrators, and also PhD students. All target respondents were emailed with an information sheet and the questionnaire. Staff were asked to either complete the questionnaire on their computer, or to print the questionnaire out and hand write the answers and then return the questionnaire via internal mail. To assure anonymity, respondents were instructed not to send the completed questionnaire back via email. In order to maximize return rates and participation, the research also made

personal contact with as many in the respondent group as was feasible, to tell them about the study and to offer a printed package.

The first stage of data collection was completed just before the Christmas break. Response rates were lower than anticipated at that stage, so we decided to administer a second phase within three months. A second stage of data collection also enabled some modifications to be made to the questionnaire. Two respondents indicated that due to the demographic and work history questions, and the small size of the institution, the survey was not in fact anonymous, as individual participants could be identified by researchers. This concern about anonymity suggests the sensitivity of the topics. We decided that some of the more personal demographic/work history questions (such as length of employment at institution, type of contract, age group, ethnicity), although interesting, were not essential to meet the research objectives and so were deleted from the next version of the questionnaire. We also managed to shorten the questionnaire by several minutes, which was advantageous as there had been some feedback that the questionnaire was 'long'. The second iteration of the survey was conducted by email only.

The response rate from both stages (in the first stage 18, and in the second stage four, thus 15% of the total number to whom surveys were sent) was lower than expected, and the changes made to the questionnaire did not appear to improve response rates. The low response rate may have been in part due to general time pressure. We noted that a number of other surveys current in our school at the same time, with greater institutional support, had seemed to struggle to gain respondents, as demonstrated by repeated reminder emails. We were careful to position this research as not being generated by the university, but some may have interpreted it that way. There was some explicit resistance from some academic women, to engaging with the survey. Both informal feedback, and written comments within the questionnaire from two respondents, put the view that that there were no gender-specific issues and that women were 'OK' and male colleagues could equally express similar perceived frustrations and issues. This perception might explain the non-participation of other potential respondents. At the same time, others who were supportive of the survey's objectives apologised to members of the team for not completing the survey as they were just too busy.

The low survey response rate meant that significant statistical analysis was not possible. Taking demographic questions out in response to confidentiality concerns assured reduced the questionnaire length, but this change did reduce information sufficiency. Finally, self-selection, both in the agreement to participate in the focus groups and to undertake the survey, could present bias.

As can be seen from our description, the study's design required modification at various points, in response to issues we faced and to participant feedback along the way. We believe that these are indicative of the emergent nature of Participative Action Research, and resulted in further learning for the research team. The key methodological issues we addressed are outlined below. While we struggled to find participants for the focus groups, the atmosphere at the sessions was generally very positive. A number of participants noted the rarity of opportunities to talk about issues in their working lives with their colleagues, and expressed appreciation of the opportunity to do so which the focus groups provided. For instance, after the general staff focus group a participant commented that: 'It is good to have a space like this. We normally just sit down and complain but that is done just in separate groups and nothing comes out of it. It was good to see that other people feel similar to you' (Focus group transcript).

Data analysis

The final section of this paper will address the main findings produced from this exploratory research. These findings represent the most prominent work issues raised by participants across focus groups and surveys and across the different questions. Indeed, while some questions required participants to specifically assess the main difficulties they face in their current employment, or to identify the factors that might make it difficult to achieve their aspirations, the issues discussed below were raised even in 'neutral' questions – such as where they were asked to simply offer feedback on the time spent in their work, or to discuss their involvement in committees.

We reconsidered our use of data from the focus groups, which were originally intended primarily to inform survey design; a re-examination of the transcripts revealed them to be a rich source of data in their own right. Indeed, this is a strength of focus groups in general; they generate large quantities of material from relatively small numbers of people in short periods of time (Del Rio-Roberts, 2009). Recordings were transcribed and thematically analysed on NVivo 9 in a manner that utilized the categories used by participants on issues that were frequently raised, as well as overall responses provided for the given questions which were generated as a tree node in the software. An attempt was also made to link these categories with issues already established in the literature (i.e. voice, gender issues, and community). Categories derived from analysis of the focus group transcripts were then used and refined in the analysis of the surveys. Under each of the categories the responses provided by the

participants were mapped out (following the NVivo tree nodes system) in order to determine the range of issues identified and their frequency.

While our discussion of findings will treat focus groups and survey findings collectively, it is important to note that there were some minor differences in the findings produced by each of the research strategies. A common feature of the focus groups was that any work difficulties were initially seen as personal to the speaker, or as equally relevant to all employees in the university. However, as the discussion continued, and participants discovered similarities between their own situation and those of others, they were more likely than in survey responses to explain these factors as affecting women as a group. To the extent that they did explain some issues as affecting a group, focus group participants also expressed a sense of powerlessness to make changes. Since this issue was absent from most survey answers, with only two participants discussing lack of control, this difference seems to reflect Kamberlis and Dimitriades' (2005) assertion that focus group methodology is capable both of revealing unarticulated norms and normative assumptions to the researcher, and of enabling social interactions between participants that create awareness of the practices and ideologies at stake in a given field. Focus groups also allowed certain issues to emerge and develop within discussion: for instance, while during the focus groups PBRF research auditing was presented as an issue that affected the lives of both academic women and professional staff, this issue only appeared once in the surveys. On the other hand, the length and format of the surveys allowed for the generation of much more specific questions, and the exploration of similar questions from different viewpoints. Not only has this produced information in relation to legal issues, participants' knowledge of HR practices and involvement in committees, but the way in which the survey questions were answered were highly specific and often identified rankings of different factors affecting participants' lives.

The findings below represent the voices of academics and general staff most strongly, given that these participants were more prominently represented in the data collection. While a focus group was conducted with tutors and research assistants, and three survey responses may be attributed to them, the material collected about this group is relatively minor. The issues presented by this group for the most part resonate with the main issues identified in findings below. It must be however noted that they did name some distinctive issues that we do not want to completely overlook here. The academic 'ivory basement' participants identified 'bullying from students' in the form of offensive language, disrespect of the class environment, and covert threats, as an issue they face in their jobs. This issue was not mentioned by any other group. Concerns related to lack of clarity about what their jobs entailed, significant variations in

working conditions depending on the department, as well as insufficient information regarding the availability of resources and services, were also much more commonly expressed within this group.

FINDINGS

We examined both survey and focus groups responses to identify the issues that were raised the most frequently and given the most emphasis. For this paper we have presented these in terms of three key issues. Other issues were raised, but not as frequently as the key issues discussed here.

Key issue one: Over-work

The most prominent issue was over-work. This term includes increasing quantity, range, and quality of work. When asked to identify 'what would help her enjoy her work more' one of the academic focus groups participants explained:

> *"I can actually just say I wouldn't mind an extra day in the week and an extra 2 hours in the day – because basically you've got so much expectation on you to research, to teach now – so that we'll be teaching more – that there never seems to be enough time in the day. You sort of some days look at what's on the list on my wall and I'm going where do I start" (Focus group 4, Academics)*

As this quotation demonstrates, it is difficult for participants to juggle a multiplicity of tasks, and the difficulties of doing so are increased by their own personal, colleagues' or managers' high expectations of their work and performance. These feelings were often associated with unclear job design, so that women felt that the tasks to be completed were never specified in their contracts, or that there was a lack of clarity within the organization about what their role entailed. This finding echoes Probert's study showing that women 'couldn't fit in' the demands of their job (Probert, 2005) and as a result often do not feel entitled to their job or to a promotion.

Over-work was perceived as affecting women more than men, as half of the participants felt that their male colleagues had to perform fewer tasks to get the same results (i.e. promotions, recognition, pay rise), and that their jobs entailed fewer responsibilities (in particular pastoral care or administration). The gendered differences in workload were not, however, seen by participants as a product of structural or institutional sexism, but were given 'women-centred' (Bird, 2011) explanations. They were often blamed on women's

'perfectionism', 'attention to detail' or 'passion for their job', as well as a general perception from other staff that women were 'better' at administration or pastoral care. These perceptions resemble the findings of other reports on women's levels of work, particularly their taking responsibility for supporting others, both colleagues and students, as well as often their own families (Sabharwal & Corley, 2009). Furthermore, women often reported, particularly in relation to their involvement with committee work, that they had a desire to be what Acker and Feuerverger (1996) call 'good department citizens'.

Women also commented that they felt a lack of control or voice with regard to their workload. One participant explained:

> *"A lot of what I do and I imagine most of us do here (is) that we're just pushed in, there's no control. They can add more and more work because we don't have any control over anything... I get the sense that, speaking for myself in my school that nobody advocates for the staff. It's do more, do more, do more. Not actually 'we're doing a lot' and (speak) back-up to the university saying 'we're doing quite a bit here by the way."*

Participants stressed the general feeling that their supervisors or managers (and indeed heads of departments or deans) were not aware of their contribution or hard work, and even less so of their needs and capacities as workers. Participants made statements along the lines that 'if I was a manager I would know my staff, I would recognise the people that were looking for achieving or wanting extra challenges or whatever and giving them to those people' (Focus group 2, General/Professional staff). These statements not only underlined perceived inadequacy in management but also pointed to a perceived lack of community, as women felt that their managers did not even know them.

Beyond lack of encouragement, some felt actively discouraged, as feedback from managers tended to be negative rather than positive in tone. For instance, during the academic focus groups participants discussed negative feedback some had received regarding publication levels. They felt that their success in other areas, such as teaching or community involvement, which had, in some cases, compromised their publication rates, were not appreciated. The general perception of the institution was summed up by a survey respondent who explained that: '[the university] is like a really bad parent, you can never do enough to satisfy them'. Feelings of lack of recognition need therefore to be conceptualised in relationship to the issue of lack of community as we discuss below.

Key issue two: Lack of community

The second most prominent issue was the sense of a lack of community or a welcoming environment were women were able to adequately form supportive relationships with colleagues. Their current working environment was perceived as socially 'chilly' (as in Cooper & Strachan, 2006), in terms of a number of factors: a lack of physical spaces to meet, insufficient informal activities to get to know colleagues, colleagues' and supervisors' disinterest in their work, and a lack of desire to form working groups, as well as feelings of exclusion from, or insufficient understanding of, how these groups operated or were formed. This last issue was a particular concern for participants who had spent fewer than five years working at the university. In contrast, participants who had worked at the university for longer periods of time either reported that they had formed small groups themselves, or that they had come to the conclusion that Universities were simply 'not a collegial environment' (Focus group 1, Academic Women).

Lack of community was also linked to the unmanageable work levels, with participants indicating that even in instances where occasions for community-building might have taken place (i.e., morning teas, Christmas parties, seminars) the pressure of deadlines or the amount of work to be completed prevented them from attending. This lack of connection can also be related to issues of job success. One of the most important factors that participants identified as advantaging men was the perception that men could tap into supportive informal male networks. In contrast, women did not feel comfortable approaching colleagues that they had not been introduced to, or who they had only met briefly at work meetings. As a result about half of the participants, academic and general staff, did not feel that they could ask for support from other colleagues, or conduct cooperative work. They also felt that the lack of connection with other university staff members often lead to conflict in relationships between senior and junior academics or between general and academic staff, both men and women. This conflict includes rivalry and some forms of exclusion which alienated the participants from the university environment. The lack of 'community' could therefore be an aspect that not only affects women emotionally, but which also underlines the structural disadvantages that women face.

Key issue three: Gender issues

Some questions in the focus groups and survey directly asked participants to identify any work issues that they thought were particular to women. In this section we draw together the issues that participants described as gendered, that is, different for men and women. We also discuss our participants' attitudes to analysing their work experiences in gender terms.

As we have indicated above, women not only saw themselves as over-worked, but some saw women as more over-worked than their male colleagues. Participants felt that, for instance, women were delegated more roles in committees, or were assigned to committees that were more demanding and less recognized than those that in which men participated. Similarly they felt that women were more likely to be involved in pastoral care or had heavier teaching loads.

Women also felt that they were excluded from networks that ensure men are supported by colleagues, and aided in promotions and other human resources processes. While this issue might be understood as a continuation of the feelings of lack of community, women across all focus groups and four surveys felt that there were strong forms of integration between men and that this further disadvantaged women. During focus groups women categorized these networks as 'boys' clubs':

> *"Just from my own observation, there does seem to be a boys' club and people get invited along – like I can see how the males go up the ranks quite quickly, even though they may not have as many publications or whatever as other staff, because there is – the old boy networks in place that they get invited on t." (Focus Group 1, Academic Women).*

However, while some participants saw women as disadvantaged in some respects because of their status as women, others were more reluctant to frame their experiences in gender terms. In the surveys, particularly, women hinted at gender differences but were less likely to frame them as directly affecting women, e.g.: 'As a female staff member I have not encountered any difficulties/ challenges in my work here from being a woman. Possibly don't get invited to the pub on Fridays?' (Survey Response).

The survey responses included some specific rejections of the proposition that there were gender differences in terms of opportunities within the school, as well as some that acknowledged differences but saw them as insignificant. In summary, views across surveys and focus groups in relation to gender differences and equity issues were mixed. Recent research on women and professional work has identified and sought to analyse such mixed views. Kelan (2009) has described them in terms of what she calls 'gender fatigue', where women 'are tired of seeing gender discrimination and prefer to see a world that is gender egalitarian, where

gender no longer matters' (Kelan, 2009:198). This is the case even in occupations or workplaces where statistics clearly show women as unequal, as we argue is the case in our business school and our university. In relation to academic women specifically, Monroe et al. (2008) report on a large study of academic women at a research university in the USA, where they found that, even where inequalities were acknowledged, women were reluctant to tackle them in legal or political terms. The researchers explain this response in the context of what we have called above the 'chilly climate' for women in universities:

> Most of our respondents rejected overt and confrontational political responses to perceived discrimination in favor of a more adaptive discourse that both revealed a keen sense of the power dynamics in the university and prioritized incremental progress over cultural overhaul. These initially surprising responses become understandable when set in the context of comments about insidious institutional or cultural forms of discrimination operating through less visible dimensions of power relations, where the conflict over preferences is not observable and openly engaged and where power's oppressive aspects are minimally visible (Monroe et al., 2008: 217-218).

Monroe et al. also commented that women saw themselves as likely to be personally disadvantaged by potential backlash against any overt action on equality issues.

It is possible that some of our participants similarly preferred to take a strategic individual approach to making the system work as well as possible for them, by working for the system, rather than criticising it in gender terms. There are also indications in our findings that women were not aware of equity policies or programmes, or of related university reports describing the current status of women. Of the survey participants in our study, fewer than half (11 out of the 27) indicated an awareness of equity policies and programmes at the university, selecting the mentoring scheme (9 participants) and the promotions seminars (6) as equity resources they knew about. Mentoring has been specifically designated in research as an opportunity for women to get access to the networks from which our participants felt excluded, and our university has a mentoring programme set up for that reason (Harper & Sawicka, 2001). But in focus groups and surveys, the university mentoring scheme was seen as inadequate. The majority of participants had found it difficult to gain access to and about a third of the overall participants believed it needed to be reviewed so that, for instance, mentees had similar interests to mentors, and that interaction was more consistent. Participants also wanted better connections with more senior women within the institution: 'The main issue probably is the difficulty with your breaking in to creating a good relationship with some of the older women. Well not just older but more experienced'.

It may also be that women staff found it easier to blame other women than to blame the system for difficulties they faced. For instance, we identified statements indicating conflict between academic and general/professional staff, with academics often blaming their over-work on poor administrative support, while general staff often discussed discriminatory or negative behaviour from academics. Eveline and Booth (2004) have argued that there is a 'strong but tacit cultural curtain dividing general and academic staff' (p. 46), and as women are the majority of general staff, this 'curtain' divides two groups of women. Divisions between women were also made clear in the ways that women addressed some of the questions For instance, some said that they personally did not having any issue with long working hours because they did not have children, but that they could see how women with families might find it hard; or explained that they were not concerned with forging a 'career' within the university and so were not affected by difficulties in gaining promotions. Thus divisions between academic and professional staff, senior or long term staff and junior or new staff, women with and without children, and so forth were not only prominent, but often used as a way of framing issues for women, instead of interpreted as systemic disadvantages.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We started this project with a curiosity about women in our own workplace, and we have treated it as a case study for investigating 'the key equity issues for women staff in university business schools'. In this exploratory study we have learned a lot about the process of using our own setting as a site to carry out sensitive research, as well as about the range of ways in which 'equity' issues or gender issues can be defined. While we do not set out to 'prove' any given proposition from this exploratory study, our findings are interpreted in the context of the wider literature to which we make connections. In terms of the research process, we have seen that our research question about potential issues of gender inequality is inseparable from the political sensitivities and challenges of the research process. Potential participants indicated a strong concern about confidentiality, demonstrating the sensitivities of the issues. The challenges we faced in terms of recruiting respondents resonated with some of the issues also evident in our findings: over-work, lack of sense of connection with the workplace community, and perhaps 'gender fatigue'.

We have taken an 'inequality regime' approach (Acker, 2006) which here looks at all women in the business school, and includes a wide range of ways to consider inequalities. It was important to us to look at the quality of working life, not just the places that women occupy in the university hierarchy. The main finding that we did *not* expect was the strong desire for

more community and sense of belonging that participants expressed. Many wanted more times and places at work to meet and connect with others. Others had given up. We found that previous research had identified this desire for community as an issue for academic women. We have gone on to argue here that this expressed wish for belonging is related to a body of research which describes the 'chilly' climate that many women find in universities, the related lack of encouragement and confidence, and reduced opportunities for a 'voice' in the workplace. It is important to note that while a sense of 'belonging' may be related in the literature to the confidence, desire and willingness to apply for promotion, and therefore to the 'top women' statistics, it is equally if not more important in terms of the quality of working life, which is an equality issue itself. Women may be promoted, or not seek promotion, but in both cases can be affected by the 'chilly climate' factors. A lack of 'voice' has also been related to an organisational climate where women are reluctant to raise issues of inequality, or to describe work issues as gender-related (Milliken & Morrison, 2003). In our sample, and among potential participants, most were unlikely or actually reluctant to describe their experience in terms of gender issues, although this interpretation of their experience shifted in focus groups where they had the opportunity to see their own issues in the context of others' accounts. It may be that the issue of 'belonging' is more important to women than to most men, or that women feel less 'at home' in the university workplace because of the still-dominant masculine culture, or there may be a combination of both these factors.

The existing research is strongly congruent with our findings that over-work was the dominant problematic issue in these women's working lives. While over-work affects all staff, researchers argue that it affects women more strongly in a range of ways, of which 'family responsibilities' are just one aspect (Baker, 2009, 2010b). Women may also be less willing than men to trade off overall quality of life with the higher prestige and pay of 'top' jobs (Jones & Torrie, 2009). It is important to note here that over-work was an issue for general staff as well as academic staff, including the PBRF research ranking exercise.

Acker's 'inequality regime' approach (Acker, 2006), includes an inquiry into whether issues of inequality are freely discussed in a given setting. We have argued on the basis of local statistics and the research literature that inequalities for women in universities still exist, taking differing forms for academic and general/professional staff women. In our experience of this research, we found that gender and inequality were considered to be sensitive issues, that the existing workplace equal opportunities policies and programmes were not well-known, and that the language of inequality or women's issues was not widely used to interpret experiences.

Rather, women tend to use an 'adaptive discourse' (Monroe et al., 2008) to cope with covert and usually invisible 'chilly climate' experiences of inequality, moving between individual coping strategies, 'women-centred' explanations for inequalities and seeing women as systemically disadvantaged.

There are a number of implications for future research, both for our own development of this project and for other researchers. We have shown that our focus groups ended up being a more valuable research tool than the survey. We now tend to think that for any follow-up or future work we might try the use of short interviews carried out in person, rather than surveys. We think it likely that participants would respond better to a personal approach and a specified time-frame, rather than a mailed survey, in spite of the trade-off with confidentiality. These interviews could possibly be combined with further focus groups. More immediately, we plan to present our preliminary findings to a wider audience of women staff in our school for feedback, as well as in the university more widely. We see these presentations and responses to them as part of the collaborative dialogue of PAR (Ryan & De Stefano, 2000). In responding to such feedback, and in consultation with our advisory group, we aim to develop practical knowledge in the form of proposed actions for change (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire, 2003).

It is clear that more research on general/ professional staff is needed, in our context and in the literature more widely. This reach is important not only to remedy the neglect of this group of staff in the research, but also to develop a wider picture of gender in universities. This research would include finer grained statistics showing where these staff are located in terms of levels of income and status, and how this work is gendered. This material can be generated by universities based on staff data. It is also important to further investigate some distinctions among the various terms used to describe non-academic staff. As we have pointed out, the confusion and change in terminology about administrative staff is a function of their invisibility, as well as changes in their roles and identities. While 'the ivory basement' is often used as a term to describe all lower-paid staff (Eveline & Booth, 2004), there are obvious differences between, for instance, women in low-paid administrative jobs and low-paid research assistants or tutors who are in post-graduate study and plan to go on to academic jobs (although some of these do end up as academic administrators). Similarly, some academic administrators are highly qualified and hold, or go on, to 'professional' senior administrative roles in the university. We can also see the ivory basement partly in class terms: while women are more likely to occupy and stay in ivory basement jobs, there are also low-paid 'masculine' gendered

manual and technical jobs in the university. Other types of low-paid work have been outsourced, such as mail-room and cleaning work.

We were not able, in this study, to explore the possibly unique features of business schools effectively. To do so we would need a bigger sample in order to carry out meaningful analyses of factors such as the transition to academic work from other professional backgrounds, and comparison between work experiences inside and outside the university. Our statistics so far show that academic women are still very much a minority in our own business school and that in some departments within the school there are very few. Despite the presence of some senior women, most women are still relatively low in the hierarchy. It would be useful to analyse what changes would be required, and at what rates, to move women through the 'pipeline' by a given target date, and to create a place where all women can feel at home. These changes are likely to involve 'climate' change and job redesign, among other factors. As Fotaki has argued, this inequality within business schools has implications not just for women staff themselves, but for our students and for the organizations that business schools hope to influence (Fotaki, 2011).

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