

# Is the gender gap in academic leadership disappearing in the Commonwealth Caribbean?

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When the University of the West Indies (UWI) was established in 1948 as the first university in the Commonwealth Caribbean, there were no immediate female academic appointments. Initially, the only woman in a related field was the assistant to the librarian. Despite this, 11 (33 per cent) of the original 33 students were female, and since 1982 women have accounted for more than 50 per cent of UWI students, and 65 per cent since 2000. This long-term shift in the gender balance within the student body has attracted much comment in the Caribbean. In contrast, much less attention has been paid to the gender gap within the academic staff, which at the level of the professoriate goes in the opposite direction and currently stands at approximately 75 per cent male to 25 per cent female. Yet, as modest as the latter percentage may appear, when compared with female student registrations, it is greater than that achieved in countries with far longer university traditions. In addition, it must be set against the long period of time it took for women to establish a foothold in the professoriate. The first female professor was appointed in 1961, and prior to 2000 there was only one year when the female share of the professoriate rose above ten per cent.<sup>1</sup>

The issue that I consider here is whether women in the Commonwealth Caribbean are likely to achieve a gender balance at the top of the academic career, comparable to their overall participation in higher education. My analysis is based on published and unpublished data from the UWI central and campus planning offices, and queries made on my behalf to the human resource (HR) departments. There are now many universities in the Commonwealth Caribbean but none of them have covered as extensive a range of disciplines for a period of over half a century as UWI. For the purposes of this article I therefore focus on the case of UWI, which is a multi-campus university serving most of the Commonwealth Caribbean. It consists of the relatively new Open Campus (2007/08) along with three older campuses in Jamaica (1948), Trinidad (1960) and Barbados (1963).

The gender shift in higher education in the Commonwealth Caribbean, which took place during the second half of the 20th century, has been most pronounced in Jamaica. My analysis, therefore, considers data for the Mona (Jamaica) Campus along with data for UWI as a whole. The Open Campus, prior to the existing distance education programmes, and affiliated institutions offering UWI programmes are largely excluded from the analysis, as comparable statistics are not always available, but it must be noted that women have a larger share of registrations in the excluded units. Staffing at the Open Campus is not reviewed, as it has not

yet employed a substantial cadre of professors, but it is also worth noting that at the top management level, UWI Open Campus has not been male dominated. From inception, its principal, deputy principal, registrar and chief financial officer have all been women.

## Creating a target for gender balance

At UWI, there is a stark contrast between the gender balance within the student body and that within the professoriate, but this is not necessarily an appropriate comparison. The gender balance at UWI, and more broadly within the academic profession, was originally decisively in favour of men. In light of this, it is expected that women would not be able to catch up immediately since new groups of academics are recruited from an earlier crop of graduates with a gender balance that differed markedly from that of the contemporary cohorts. What then would be an appropriate benchmark that would allow us to determine the extent to which the gap is being closed? The approach I use is to assume that the academics employed at UWI were recruited from a pool of graduates that had the same gender balance as the one that prevailed at UWI in the year when the current staff obtained their first degree.<sup>2</sup> It would be better to use the gender balance among graduates but there is more consistent data on student registrations. Based on my assumption, the gender balance among the academic staff should be the same as the gender balance in student registrations lagged appropriately. To choose such a lag, all members of staff working at Mona in 2012 were considered and an average was taken of the number of years since they each obtained a first degree. The average for all academics is 25, and for professors is 33.

This is not the length of time between graduation and appointment, as members of staff continue to serve after their appointment. It may not be an ideal measure, as persons serve for widely differing periods, but it is the simplest one that provides a benchmark for the gender balance within the group of qualified persons from which the current staff were recruited. In as far as the shift in the gender balance has proceeded relatively smoothly without major reversals, this lagging procedure should work well.

The use of UWI can be justified, as a large proportion of its staff obtained their first degree there. In addition, the use of first degrees is defensible since career paths vary widely between disciplines and a very large percentage of UWI staff did not do their terminal degree at UWI. The figure for the Mona Campus is used for simplicity, as additional analysis is done on that campus for reasons explained above.

## Halfway towards the gender balance target?

Women made up 44 per cent of the UWI academic staff in 2010. This figure, which is just short of 50 per cent, doubled in the two preceding decades. As would be expected, it was achieved by women occupying a larger percentage of more junior positions – and in the humanities as opposed to the natural sciences and engineering. These patterns provide evidence of the persistence of traditional gender roles, but the main question is: how significant is this achievement when set against the benchmark identified above? The reference point for student registrations is taken from the year 1985, which indicates that 25 years previously women made up 53 per cent of the student body. By dividing the two percentages, we can conclude that women had only achieved 83 per cent of what could be considered an appropriate target for gender balance for academics as a whole.

Applying the same analysis to the professors, we can note that in 1988 (the first year with published data) women made up seven per cent of the professoriate. This share increased slowly to 11 per cent by 2000 and more rapidly to 25 per cent in 2010. The comparable percentages for female student registrations lagged by 33 years are 33, 36 and 47 per cent for the years 1955, 1967 and 1977, respectively. Women therefore achieved 21, 31 and 54 per cent of a gender balance target among the professors for the years 1988, 2000 and 2010, respectively, and this indicative figure has been over 50 per cent since 2004. Thus, starting from a zero base in 1948, women have reached the halfway point in a certain sense. Below, I consider whether women will ever make it to 100 per cent of the target, but prior to doing so, I focus on the case of the Mona Campus where women have been making the greatest strides.

In 2012, women comprised 54 per cent of the academic staff at Mona. The corresponding figure for student registrations lagged by 25 years to 1987 was 59 per cent. This indicates that women have achieved 92 per cent of a gender balance target at Mona subject to similar cautions expressed for UWI as a whole. Considering the years 2001 to 2012, we note that women have doubled their presence within the professoriate from 16 to 32 per cent, and that this share has remained relatively stable at approximately 30 per cent or just above during the period – except for 2009 when there was a peak of 39 per cent. Using the same 33-year lag and estimates of student registrations, there appears to be some variability with around an average 67 per cent of the target being met in recent years. There was a peak at 79 per cent in 2009 and a decline to 64 per cent in 2012. On the two indicators of current share and share relative to the lagged student population, Mona is ahead of UWI as a whole, and the standing of women within the professoriate compares favourably with the average for universities in Europe, North America and the rest of the Commonwealth, despite being some way off from a balanced gender target.

## Will the target be met?

A more detailed analysis of past trends and of the composition of the senior academic staff at Mona suggests that the growth in the share of women within the professoriate will continue. As to when this might reach the level of 50 per cent, it is difficult to say. In

addition, I do not believe that it is likely to rapidly come into line with the level of female participation in tertiary education – unless there is a dramatic rebalancing in the near future, which would lead to a decline in the preponderance of female students in higher education, which I believe is unlikely to happen.

In looking to the future, it is important to recognise that the share of women within the professoriate has been achieved in the Commonwealth Caribbean and that this has occurred without major programmes in place to promote gender equity – as have been implemented in other regions or within specific institutions in these regions. One such celebrated case is the University of Tromsø in Norway. It is reported that, based on a programme implemented there, the share of women professors increased from nine to 30 per cent in ten years. Perhaps a similar programme could double the UWI figure by 2020 thereby achieving a 50 per cent target. In his blog, 'Thoughts on University Leadership', the pro-rector of the University of Tromsø, Curt Rice, stressed that 'the single most important success factor for increasing gender equality and gender balance in the workplace is engagement from top leadership'.<sup>3</sup> Up to now, the gender gap among the top academics has not received the level of attention from the top leadership of UWI that the preponderance of women within the student body has received. I have argued in various places that both issues can be traced to gender privileging and solutions that challenge the elements of gender privileging that impact negatively on both males and females must be found.

## Endnotes

- 1 As explained in the text, figures relate to three UWI campuses. Statistics are not strictly comparable, especially over the long term. Readers should therefore focus on trends rather than individual data points. Interpellations and estimates are used for missing data points. Year dates refer to the academic years from August to July of the following year. Staff data does not always account for many non-tenure/temporary positions and excludes part timers.
- 2 I previously used this approach in: Mark Figueroa (2004), 'Old (Female) Glass Ceilings and New (Male) Looking Glasses: Challenging gender privileging in the Caribbean'. In Bailey, B. and Leo-Rhynie, E. (Eds.), *Gender in the 21st Century: Caribbean perspectives, visions and possibilities*, Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, pp. 134–53.
- 3 Curt Rice, '5 Suggestions to the Norwegian Government About Women Professors'. Accessed 17/08/2013. <http://curt-rice.com/2013/01/10/5-suggestions-to-the-norwegian-government-about-women-professors>

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