



Gender equality and representation  
within and beyond the University  
of the Highlands and Islands

*A book in celebration of International Women's Day  
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## Closing thoughts

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When I initially saw the contents for this book I was struck by how the female authors are drawn from different departments across the University- from academics, to librarians, professional support staff to PhD students and student association officers. It is heartening to see such broad female representation across a higher education institution; institutions that were largely inaccessible for our mothers and grandmothers. I certainly echo the thoughts expressed by Natalie Jester in the foreword that women can currently claim their educational space thanks to the women before them who have carved out this space. In their own way, each chapter connects with the theme for this year's International Women's Day #Choosetochallenge: challenging masculine conceptions of academic leadership,

challenging the notion of what qualities are to be found in a 'typical' engineer, scientist or early years practitioner; challenging hierarchical notions of pedagogy and teaching practice. It is by challenging stereotypes that we can start to achieve equality for women in the University and beyond.

And of course, gender stereotype can be harmful to men too and we see in one chapter how the under-representation of males in Early Learning and Childcare has also been tackled in order to challenge the stereotype of care work as 'women's work'. Achieving gender equality within the Early Learning and Childcare setting is doubly important, not only as a workplace where gender imbalance is rife, but where young children may learn harmful gender stereotypes. Recruiting men is part of the answer, but 'ungendering' this setting is also crucial, including dispelling assumptions that male and female carers can have different functions; that 'rough and tumble' play is only for the males, for example.

The variety of initiatives described in these chapters largely fit within the two strategies (characterised by Lois Gray in her chapter) as “exclusively female (or male) incentives” and “role models and supportive strategies”: the Aurora Programme, Women’s Network, Autistic Women in Science Society and CHAMP programme focus on supporting and promoting women, and men, in a single sex environment, to allow them to develop unimpeded by the pressures which would normally occur within a mixed environment dominated by the other sex. The feminist curriculum, Libguides, STEM and STEAM initiatives and Minority Men provide role models and curriculum approaches and content that offer a fairer and more representative way of approaching and disseminating knowledge. These two strategies (single sex environments, role models and supportive strategies) are both vital. Where female role models have a positive influence in attracting women to areas of work and study perceived previously to be the sole preserve of men, female-only spaces are a vehicle to upskill and embolden women in order that they can flourish within their work and study.

But of course, systemic issues still persist. What the chapters in this book describe are great strides towards what Natalie Jester in her foreword describes as substantive representation: where a group's interests are represented, and we can certainly see how these initiatives and the work of individuals represent and foreground the interests of women in academia. What we have yet to attain is descriptive representation: where the institution resembles the society from which it is drawn, and we have not yet achieved the gender balance within the professoriate, senior management or PG student population that is representative in this sense.

What remains to be done? A hint is given in Ann Tilbury's chapter when one of the recommendations for improving the impact of the Aurora programme, and attracting women into leadership positions is to move "beyond approaches preoccupied with 'fixing the women'". It is organisational cultures, structures, practices, and behaviours that need to be changed to include (or at least not exclude) women, rather than women that need to adapt to cultures, structures

and practices that were never designed to accommodate them in the first place.

One of the two chapters in this book which talk specifically about men dealt with the issue of the lack of men in the childcare and early years sector due in part to the societal view of this work as of low status. It is no coincidence that care work is more often than not work of low pay and low status- when this same work is undertaken in a domestic setting it is unpaid and overwhelmingly done by women. These unpaid carers (of children and sick and elderly relatives) are some of Caroline Criado Perez's 'Invisible Women' because their (unpaid) work is not acknowledged, and as a result the male-dominated (paid) workplace is built to suit those unencumbered by such caring responsibilities, who are usually men. We find so often that prestigious and high-paid roles are full-time, inflexible, involving long hours, with no possibility of job sharing etc., and this is no less true of the academic environment than any other sector.

I am hugely inspired by the efforts described in each of the chapters of this book and they have no doubt assisted with the quest for gender equality at our institution. But challenges remain, and I call on all colleagues as individuals and teams to foster a culture that supports equality and does not just pay it lip service.

## **Author bio**

Dr Heather Fotheringham is Evidence-Based Enhancement Lead at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). Based within the Learning and Teaching Academy, her role involves working independently to use data and evidence to inform enhancements in learning, teaching and student support and promoting and encouraging the use of evidence-based approaches amongst academic staff. Heather leads on university-wide strategic initiatives to help develop a data-driven culture including the university's work for QAA Scotland's national Enhancement Theme, and management and analysis of student feedback surveys including the National Student Survey (NSS).

Heather studied philosophy at the University of Leeds, and held teaching and research roles there after her PhD studies. She then moved on to the Higher Education Academy (now AdvanceHE) in the Evidence-Informed Practice team before relocating to the Highlands in 2009.

## References

Criado Perez, C. (2019) *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. London: Chatto & Windus