



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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Foreword

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My grandmother, Barbara, was born in the year 1930. She had always been academic and had a lifelong interest in learning: reading, writing, and especially languages. She had been evacuated as a child during World War Two and her parents died within quick succession. She was adopted and raised by a family who owned a shoe shop and, thus, when she was older (and after an initial delay due to the war) she was fortunate enough to go to University. She graduated with a degree in German and Latin in 1952 from the University of Bristol, an institution that I myself would first graduate from 59 years later. Whilst my grandmother always recognised the immense privilege she had in

attending University at this time, as a woman, she was always reflective of the opportunities that might have passed her by on account of her gender. For my other grandmother, Maureen, who was born around the same time, education was not really an option as an adult; she had her first child at 17, after which time she worked briefly as an auxiliary nurse. After this, she dedicated her life to her family, including supporting her granddaughter in her education every step of the way. Why am I telling you this? Isaac Newton said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants" and, whilst it would surely make my grandmothers blush to hear it, they were giants to me, shaping the ways in which I would engage with my own higher education. I am, therefore, starting here because there are so many women who have gone before us that have made it possible for other women (including myself) to claim their educational space, from grandmothers, to those leading social change, to lecturers, to librarians. One of the things I like most about this

book is its quiet challenge to all of us to build on this work, to do better in our own roles. As I see it, then, this book builds on the work of the past, driving us further towards gender equality across a whole range of areas.

Women's equality – my starting point for this foreword, written for International Women's Day 2021 – is an issue from top to bottom within further and higher education. Women hold disproportionately low percentages of senior positions even today, are under-represented in reading lists in many programmes, and can find themselves unwelcome in more traditionally male areas of education. This matters for a variety of reasons: descriptive representation, as I have explained elsewhere drawing upon analyses of women in legislatures, is where the institution resembles the society from which it is drawn and is important for reasons of fairness. Secondly, however, substantive representation is where a

group's interests are represented and attended to, and this is also important here. Whilst they may not put it in these terms, both descriptive and substantive representation are things that students want and are increasingly vocalising their desire for. Neither of these types of representation alone or enough to ensure that women can flourish in further and higher education but together they are a good starting position. Under-representation is even more stark when we consider this from an intersectional perspective. Dr Nicola Rollock, for example, has found that there are almost no black female professors in the United Kingdom. Despite successes that we may have had since my grandmother's time at university, we still have some way to go towards ensuring gender equality in further and higher education.

As I sit down to write this foreword today, it has been over one year since the UK became gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic. None of us in the further and

higher education sector were sure at the start how the pandemic would impact us, however, it became obvious quite quickly that it was going to pose challenges across a range of areas, especially with respect to equalities. I am not a parent, but one of the things that was evident almost immediately was that women were struggling to provide childcare and perform academic work at the same time. In terms of our teaching there were a range of other inequalities to consider, from sinophobia and its impact upon our East Asian students in particular, to class disparities that made it harder to engage with online learning due to a lack of technology and suitable home Wi-Fi equipment. Why would I want to remind us of this pandemic by immortalising it in this foreword? Because it shows us that there are often equalities issues that we don't see: the pandemic has made it much harder to look away from these. It is a reminder that we all need to work together to solve issues of inequality, whether these relate to gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, or (most likely) all at once.

The pandemic has caused us to re-focus upon some equalities issues and to work harder to create solutions to the problems that we have. I am hopeful that this has reminded us of the importance of embedding equality considerations, both in our work with students and for ourselves as practitioners. As identified by numerous chapters of this book, one of the key changes in recent years has been the opening of the Internet to the public and its increased influence in day-to-day life. The Internet causes a variety of challenges from a gender perspective however, one positive is the potential to use the Internet as a site for raising awareness, community building, and taking action. With the pandemic complicating face to face meeting and organisation, there are perhaps now new and creative ways in which we might approach improving gender equality in further and higher education that we might not have considered before.

The range of topics covered in this book is a broad one, from holding space for autistic women in science technology, engineering and maths subjects, to the use of women's networks in further and higher education, to the need for a dedicated library attention to the issue of gender. I think this range of subjects makes clear just how important the subject of gender is; it is not simply something that should be bolted onto many modules in the last class of the term (which is sadly still the case in some places), it is a subject in itself. It is, however, also an important organising structure within further and higher education itself, with a wide range of difficulties and as a result a wide range of solutions. As a result of its laudable aims, I am especially pleased to be contributing this foreword having come to know some of the participants in this book through the delivery of a talk for the University of Highlands and Islands on the subject of feminist curriculum activism. This book will provide a useful resource for anyone in further and higher education who has an

interest in driving forward the gender equality agenda. For me, one of the main motivators is my 8-year-old niece. My niece is funny, smart, energetic, and kind; I want the whole world to be open to her and that starts with education. I want her to grow up to be a scientist if she wants, to never feel pushed out of leadership roles, and to be able to connect with other women in mutual support networks. I want things to be better for her and – other girls – than they were for my grandmothers and for us. I want things to continue to get better for all the girls who come after but, as the authors of this book have demonstrated, that will require both time and effort. Consider this an invitation, then, to think about the ways in which you might help with this endeavour, too.