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

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Implementing the Aurora leadership development programme in the University of the Highlands and Islands: insights and implications

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Abstract

At the University of the Highlands and Islands' (UHI) first International Women's Day event in March 2018, delegates proposed engagement with the Advance HE Aurora Leadership Development Programme for those identifying as women as part of a range of actions to address gender inequality in leadership roles within the institution. Later that year, the university approved funding for ten participants and since then twenty-one women from across

the university partnership, employed in research, teaching and professional services roles have undertaken the programme.

UHI Aurorans, as they are known, have shared their experiences and reflections on completion of the programme through the 2018/19 Evaluation Study (Tilbury 2019) and research study of the 2019/20 cohort which is currently underway. While these studies highlight the profoundly positive impact of the programme for UHI Aurora participants, they also draw attention to the limitations of an institutional approach to addressing gender inequality solely focused on a women-only leadership development programme. The findings reflect the current research literature which argues that addressing gender inequality requires changes in organisational cultures and structures and that this in turn requires a critical exploration of leadership: how it is enacted, valued, rewarded, and developed. By moving beyond approaches preoccupied with 'fixing the women', organisational cultures, structures, practices, and behaviours can be changed to ensure that

those (particularly women) who aspire to leadership are not excluded from opportunities to lead. This chapter concludes with recommendations arising from the evaluation studies which aim to contribute to greater gender equality and inclusive approaches within the university and to inform other institutions facing similar challenges.

Keywords: Leadership, leadership development, women, Aurora, higher education, evaluation

Advance HE Aurora Leadership Development Programme for women

In 2013 Professor Louise Morley produced the Stimulus Paper - Women in Higher Education Leadership: Absences and Aspirations. Morley's research on the number of senior leadership roles in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) highlighted some stark findings: although 44% of academics were women only 19% were in professorial roles, and only 28% were in senior management roles (Morley 2013: 15). Based on Professor Morley's

recommendations a six-month development initiative to address the gender imbalance within senior leadership positions in higher education was launched by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in November 2013. This initiative was named the Aurora Leadership Development Programme for Women. Since 2018, Aurora has been offered through Advance HE, the higher education sector agency.

The programme aims to support women and their institutions to fulfil their leadership potential through a 5-month development programme delivered in regional cohorts across the UK and Ireland. Since it began, in 2013, over 7,000 women and nearly 200 institutions have participated in the programme (Advance HE 2021a). Facilitated by leadership development experts the programme consists of four development days which comprise of keynote speakers, group working, individual reflection and networking. The development days are structured around four key aspects of leadership: Identity impact and voice; Politics and influence; Core leadership

skills; Adaptive leadership skills. Participants also attend an introductory webinar and two action learning set days which focus on supporting participants to explore work-related challenges, identify solutions and next steps.

University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)'s engagement with Aurora

The University of the Highlands and Islands is a federated institution encompassing both further and higher education. It brings together a partnership of 13 independent colleges, research institutions and a central executive office based in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Many of these colleges are in rural island communities and incorporate small learning centres which enable students to remain in their local community while studying. Most staff are based at and employed by these colleges with their own employment terms and conditions, strategies, and priorities. This diverse geographical, organisational and cultural landscape forms a unique and richly varied backdrop to the university's engagement in Aurora.

On 8 March 2018, at the university's first International Women's Day conference, delegates proposed engagement with the Advance HE Aurora Leadership Development Programme (referred to as 'Aurora') as part of a range of actions. This proposition was considered by the university's Partnership Council who approved funding for ten participants on the 2018/19 programme. The stated aim of the investment was "*to encourage women to apply for more senior roles within the institution*" and to deliver on the university's Athena Swan Bronze Award action plan (Docherty 2016) of funding two female staff per annum on Aurora. Established in 2005 the Athena Swan Charter provides a framework to support gender equality within higher education and research with a particular focus on "advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM)" (Advance HE 2021b).

The funding also aimed to address issues identified in previous reports including the university's Update to Equality Outcomes and Mainstreaming Report which

reported a mean gender pay gap of 22% in favour of men. The report noted that through "*support for women on the Aurora Leadership Programme, we hope to encourage more female applicants to senior posts*" (Hall 2019: 51). In addition, the Enhancement Lead Institutional Review (ELIR) Report of 2015/16 (QAA 2016) recommended initiatives to build leadership capacity within the institution.

The university's Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA) supports and enables the enhancement of learning and teaching and has led the university's engagement in Aurora since 2018. The programme began the LTA's educational leadership capacity building as a key initiative in delivering the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy (UHI 2019). For the purposes of this chapter, leadership capacity is defined as the "*collective ability of leadership to detect and cope with changes in the external environment by maintaining the primary goals of the organisation*" (Kivipõld and Vadi 2010: 118).
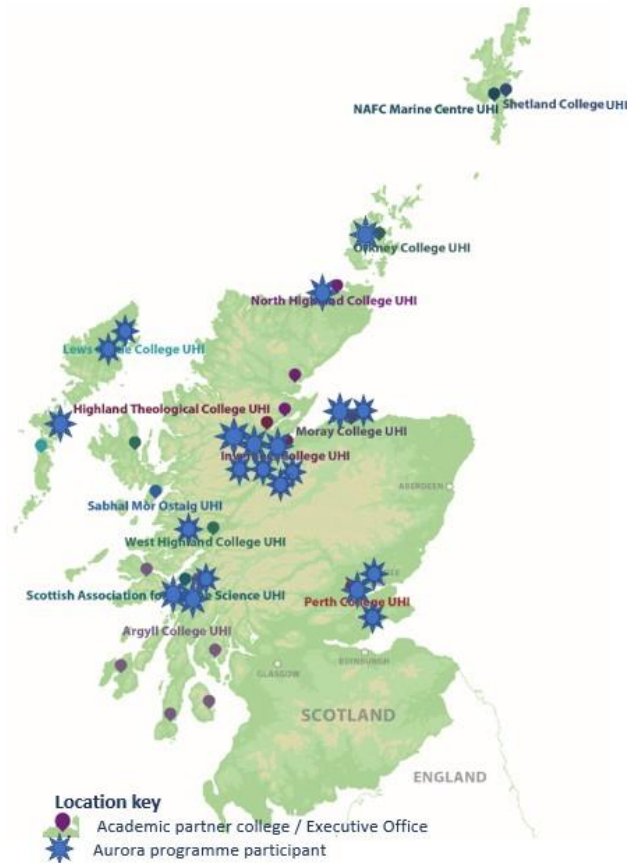
Figure 1.1: Map showing the location of UHI Aurorans within the university

Implementation of Aurora in UHI

The approach to implementing Aurora in UHI was informed by academic and practitioner literature on leadership development programmes. In particular, the literature highlighted the benefits of providing additional professional development opportunities and meaningful opportunities for participants to continue developing their professional practice. (Avolio et al 2009; Gentle and Foreman 2014; Bamber and Stephani 2016). The implementation includes a rigorous panel-based selection process and for selected participants, a welcome webinar, regular cohort communications, a mentor from the University's Mentoring Scheme and an annual opportunity to present their experiences at the university's International Women's Day event. Since 2018, twenty-one women have successfully completed the programme; ten in 2018/19; five in 2019/20 and six in 2020/21. They have formed a growing community of UHI Aurorans who have collaborated and shaped the UHI Aurora experience.

Evaluation of 2018/19 approaches

The evaluation approach of the university's engagement in Aurora aimed to determine the extent to which participants were more encouraged to apply for senior roles within the institution while also exploring their perceptions of the outcomes of the programme, including any changes in their outlook on leadership, their leadership behaviour and practices, and their leadership aspirations. The approach aimed to understand effects which were likely to be *"indirect, behavioural, enacted through relationships and conversation, occur over time and would be messy and difficult to capture in a demonstrably 'cause-effect' manner"* (Jarvis et al 2013: 33). The studies also identify how the university could support them to further realise their leadership aspirations.

The evaluation study of participation in Aurora 2018/19 used a mixed-methods approach: an online survey instrument to gather individual feedback and a virtual focus group to bring participants together to co-construct their feedback as a group. Developing this approach, a more

formal research study was adopted to evaluate participation in Aurora 2019/20 using an extended version of the 2018/19 online survey tool, and the addition of semi-structured one-hour participant interviews. All fifteen Auroran participants from both cohorts engaged in the studies.

The evaluation studies are inevitably limited by the small number of participants; an analysis based exclusively on participants' perceptions; and the researcher's involvement as an "*embedded evaluator*" (Stefani and Baume 2016: 169). These constraints inhibit opportunities to generalise from the studies, however, the findings provide a strong sense of "*the intangible outcomes*" (Bamber and Stefani 2016: 243) of Aurora through participants' feedback data and suggest a direction of travel to address gender inequality in leadership development.

Emboldening effect of Aurora for UHI participants

The narrative which emerges from the evaluation studies indicates that Aurora has encouraged the participants to

apply for senior roles and that they have valued the opportunity to explore their perceptions of leadership within their current professional practice. Aurora appears to have a profoundly beneficial impact on participants' professional practice as UHI Aurorans emerge emboldened by the experience. This emboldening effect can be explored through four recurring themes derived from the data analysis of both studies:

1. Growth in confidence in the practice of leadership
2. Creating a sense of belonging through a new internal network
3. Exploration of the nature of leadership
4. Identifying as a leader

Growth in confidence in the practice of leadership

A growth in confidence is evidenced by the survey data from both cohorts, with all ten 2018/19 Aurorans reporting an increase in their confidence in their leadership capabilities and similarly, the 2019/20 Aurorans reporting

an increase in their confidence in their leadership as one of the top four benefits of Aurora. This increase in confidence was a recurring theme in the feedback from the focus groups and individual interviews as the following quotes illustrate:

> " .. Although my leadership journey has only just started, this programme has given me the confidence, connections and tools to strive for success and hone my skills."

> "It has given me the confidence going forward to step up and take the lead, as I feel like I have hundreds of inspirational women behind me all the way, saying: You're in charge!"

> " .. I feel quite empowered, and I've definitely had a mindset shift in what I think leadership is all about".

> "I think it's having a voice and certainly, it is about having a voice at the table and using that voice and knowing that actually, other people can have things covered but you have a unique contribution to make, and I think that's what's coming over to you".

Exploration of the nature of leadership

Feedback from the 2018/19 focus group evidenced the value of the opportunity to examine the nature of leadership particularly in the context of their professional practice. This sentiment was also evident in the feedback from the 2019/20 focus group which explored the values and behaviours of leadership:

> "So, maybe it's less about necessarily becoming a leader, but it's more about being able to connect to your individual … motivations and then through that process, I think that helps you see where you sit in both in your own, in your own team and also the institution and I think just being able to make the link between these different values."

> "… the best definition I could come up with for leadership was that it was a relationship of influence. We're all in relationships and we exercise influence."

The feedback indicates that participants were encouraged to critically reflect on what leadership meant to them and what values underpinned their own leadership practice. As one respondent reflected.

> "This increased understanding of what other leaders are experiencing and how they respond to/address different situations and challenges. This allows me to use such observations to support my own leadership development".

This finding is not surprising as one of the principles of Aurora is to encourage participants to find their own authentic approach to leadership:

> "The Aurora programme does not define leadership or promote a particular model. Participants are encouraged to think in terms of leadership behaviours and characteristics, to construct their own meaning of the concept and to enact leadership in whatever way they choose, appropriate to context." (Barnard et al. 2016: 17)

Creating a sense of belonging through a new internal network

The evaluations highlight that networking opportunities with internal colleagues are particularly beneficial in the context of a geographically distributed university where distance and isolation were often a barrier to networking. For the 2018/19 Aurorans, internal networking opportunities were

viewed as *"paramount [for] a group of professional leaders"* and regarded as significant in supporting a greater "*understanding how the organisation works*". These newly developed internal networks helped them to co-create a greater understanding of the 'business of the university' through sharing their knowledge and expertise within their network. Similarly, the 2019/20 Aurorans survey findings rated internal networking opportunities as one of the most beneficial aspects of Aurora.

Feedback from Aurorans suggested that the sense of belonging that arose from the programme was an unexpected outcome as one put it, "I am delighted to have shared the journey with such a wonderful bunch of colleagues from across the UHI partnership. Already we are working together to share ideas and keep in touch". Another Auroran said "I think there's something about bonding", another said, "being part of the UHI cohort was a real highlight of the programme and has given me real excitement for being able to continue my leadership development alongside this group at UHI". The tone of the

focus group and individual interview feedback also evidences how fundamental this sense of 'belonging' is to the UHI Aurorans and that their learning appears to have been significantly enhanced because of its collaborative approach. This sense of belonging is captured in each of the short films the UHI Aurorans have presented at the university's annual International Women's Day celebrations since 2019.

Identifying as a leader

The findings of the 2018/19 study indicate that Aurora supports participants to develop their approach to leadership through identifying their professional values and a more nuanced understanding of leadership behaviours. Combined with a greater sense of confidence, this empowers UHI Aurorans to identify as leaders and to seek out leadership opportunities.

> "This was a really brilliant opportunity …. AURORA raises the profile of female leadership and enables you to embark in some great professional networking and self-belief as a leader".

"The Aurora programme has already had a huge impact on me; it really has helped me to grow in confidence and have faith in my own abilities (something that I question far more than I should). It has been very refreshing to explore my own feelings and doubts in a safe and supportive environment and realise that I am like so many other females in the University sector. The programme has helped me to identify my strengths and weaknesses as a leader and most importantly has given me the tools to try and make me both a better leader and mentor."

"I went to find out about leadership. Instead, I discovered I am being an influencer. I found that far more profound and important to me".

Tangible and intangible outcomes of Aurora

These extracts from the evaluation studies demonstrate the positive impact of Aurora and how participants are emboldened by the experience through a growth in confidence, belonging to new networks, an exploration of their perspectives on leadership and establishing their identities as leaders. Their reflections and feedback focus on defining leadership in their own terms and the emotional

and relational aspects of leadership. The studies present a clear account of participants emerging from Aurora as reflective, highly motivated, leaders with the capacity and aspirations to further their leadership and make a greater contribution to the future of the university.

The tangible outcomes of the programme to date include the securing of new positions outside the university by three UHI Aurorans. In addition, one UHI Auroran has undertaken a secondment, and several have applied for more senior roles; others have undertaken professional recognition through ALPINE[1] and one has recently begun a second, three-year term, staff representative role on the UHI university court (with three of four recent nominations being UHI Aurorans).

These examples only partially evidence the impact of Aurora, as the research and practitioner literature on the

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[1] ALPINE is the university's framework for the recognition of good practice in learning and teaching and allows the university to award Fellowships of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) with Advance HE

limitations of evaluation approaches on leadership development programmes highlights (Avolio et al. 2010; Day et al. 2014; Bamber and Stephanie 2016; Baume and Popovic 2016; Jarvis et al. 2013) much of the impact is 'intangible' and evades measurement.

The intangible outcomes of Aurora including the emboldening effect appears from the evaluation studies to pervade the participants professional practice and include a 'ripple effect' with the colleagues.

> "I think there's huge amounts of professional capital and leadership capital, honestly, the organization would fall apart without it, but it isn't seen because it's the glue and it's doing its job. So, maybe there's a role for us in highlighting the glue, highlighting that there is this flow of capital going."

Conventional approaches to evaluating leadership development programmes often miss this 'invisible 'glue' and in doing so underestimate the significant value of programmes like Aurora. The evaluation studies aim to capture and demonstrate to stakeholders both the intangible and tangible outcomes of Aurora at UHI to date.

The absence of opportunities

The evaluation studies evidence the value of Aurora in providing participants with an increase in confidence in their leadership capabilities and motivation to seek leadership roles, and to take on new responsibilities within the university. However, the evaluation studies also reveal a deep sense of participants' frustration that a women-only leadership development programme appears to be the only initiative to address gender inequality in leadership roles within the university. The recurring themes from the 2018/19 Aurorans include:

- lack of opportunity to utilise new skills developed from the programme;
- lack of supportive institutional workplace culture and practices;
- lack of identification of potential opportunities;
- lack of recognition of the demands of balancing home and working life.

Similarly, feedback by 2019/20 Aurorans stated that:

"those [leadership] positions don't exist."

"There is no obvious trajectory for leadership progression."

"There are no obvious institutional opportunities apart from voluntary ones which do not then fit in contracted hours."

"… part of my reason for attending Aurora - to identify potential opportunities in UHI beyond being Programme Leader and beyond being employed in one AP. I am still unclear what these might be or how I can become aware of them."

"It is not clear how UHI wants to make use of Aurorans or sees them as having something, in particular, to offer to particular (new) roles."

"I cannot identify opportunities for career progression in leadership as a recognised trajectory. Roles are tied to programme networks or existing linear structures, are purely managerial within APs and primarily to do with FE, rather than being cross-AP or leadership (interpersonal or impact) focussed."

"it's not about fixing us. It's about fixing structures and cultures."

Their reflections also underline significant challenges related to balancing home and working life particularly

those with caring responsibilities. The expectations of leadership roles whether research, academic or professional services were regarded as unattainable and/or unappealing.

Moving beyond 'fixing the women'

The evaluation studies expose aspects of current working cultures, structures, practices and behaviours which exclude those (and not just those identifying as women) who aspire to leadership. These aspects are evidenced in the recent publication of the fourth and final report of the five-year longitudinal study: "Onwards and Upwards: Tracking the Careers of Women's Leadership in Higher Education" (Barnard et al. 2021) which follows the career journeys of Aurora participants and provides an effective backdrop to the findings of the UHI evaluation studies. Barnard et al. (2021) reported that:

> "... women in senior leadership roles may be defeated by the frustrations of the job, excessive workload, pressure or poor managers (Acker 2014) and, for academics, the lack of time and energy to undertake

prestige academic work." (Barnard et al. 2021:8)

As recommended in their previous report: "Onwards and Upwards? Tracking women's work experiences in higher education Year 3 report" (Arnold et al. 2019):

> "Institutions should consider the leadership discourses they use, their effectiveness and the value of 'discourse diversity' to promote different legitimate ways of leading. They should review what they say they want and whether that is really what gets rewarded" (Arnold et al. 2019:5)

There is a clear case for leadership development initiatives to move beyond approaches based on '*fixing the women'* and to undertake a critical reflection on how we talk about leadership, how leadership is enacted, what we value in leadership, and approaches to leadership capacity building within the university. The university's first Educational Leadership Symposium, held in November 2020[2], initiated the LTA's contribution to exploring these 'discourses of

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[2] Described in the LTA blog post *Building Educational Leadership Capacity: Urgency and Agency* (Connor, S. and Tilbury, A. (2021)

leadership' and provided an opportunity for colleagues to explore the behaviours and structures which exclude those who aspire to lead in the university from leadership roles.

Recommendations

The findings of the evaluation studies and the longitudinal study of Aurora (Barnard et al. 2021) can be drawn together as an evidence-based set of recommendations to support a critical reflection on addressing gender inequality in leadership roles and building leadership capacity within the university. These recommendations should include:

- Defining what is valued in leadership and how it is rewarded;
- Identifying and provide more inclusive approaches to leadership roles including part-time and job share options;
- Reviewing the requirements of senior leadership roles so that they are:
  - not potentially harmful to everyone who does them and

- o potentially differentially detrimental and off-putting to some groups of staff;
- Defining work/life balance and flexible working patterns and how they are supported;
- Gathering data across the university on decisions relating to the recruitment, and appointments of leadership roles to support an evidence-based approach to addressing gender inequality within the university;
- Exploring opportunities for career progression and development into leadership roles including effective secondments and shadowing;
- Continuing to fund the university's engagement in Aurora, to sustain and develop the benefits of the programme and to evaluation and report on its impact;
- Continuing to develop other initiatives to support the building of educational leadership capacity within the university.

Conclusion and next steps

As the Barnard et al. longitudinal study observes much has changed since Aurora began, but "the underlying concerns raised in 2013 about gender inequalities in the HE sector remain as pertinent now as then" *(*2021:5). The evaluation studies of the university's engagement in Aurora aim to add to the body of evidence that argues that addressing gender inequality requires changes in organisational cultures and structures and that this will require a critical exploration of how leadership is enacted, valued, rewarded and developed. By moving beyond approaches preoccupied with 'fixing the women' these changes can be grounded in what is valued in leadership.

The research-based evaluation studies aim to offer a more detailed understanding of the impact of Aurora in the context of a geographically distributed, tertiary institution and to contribute to the development of effective approaches to address gender inequalities in the sector. The next step in this journey will be to disseminate the

findings of the 2019/20 evaluation through a peer-reviewed publication.

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2018/19 UHI Aurorans

Raeanne Miller, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Executive Office, UHI

Diana Macleod, Lecturer, North Highland College, UHI

Antonia Thomas, Lecturer, Archaeology, Humanities and Gaelic, Orkney College, UHI

Helen Coker, Programme Leader, Inverness College, UHI

Rosemary McCormack, Head of Curriculum, Programme Leader, Moray College, UHI

Anna-Wendy Stevenson, Programme Leader, Lews Castle College, UHI

Nicola Smith, Head of Careers and Employability, Executive Office, UHI

Fiona Gunn, Professional Development Manager, Inverness College, UHI

(Not included in the image)

Lindsay Vare, Geochemist, Scottish Association for Marine Science, UHI

Jane Edwards, Student Engagement Officer, Perth College, UHI

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Elizabeth McHugh, Electronic Resources Manager, Executive Office

Helen Aird, Marketing and PR Officer, Inverness College, UHI

Rosie Blake, Lecturer and Site Leader, BA (Hons) Fine Art, Lews Castle College, UHI

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Programme for women within the university. Ann became an Advance HE Aurora institutional champion in 2020.

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