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**Accounting for the Gender Imbalance in
UK Higher Education Administration:
a Discourse Analysis**

Gabriella Caminotto

**A thesis submitted to City, University of
London for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Language and
Communication Science**

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Declaration

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Abstract

UK Higher Education is considered to be at the forefront of equality and diversity policy and practice, yet its staff profile is characterised by persistent gender (among other types of) imbalance. This thesis investigates this paradox, focusing on the under-researched professional and support services staff, and particularly female-dominated administrative and secretarial occupations.

In contrast to the few previous studies on the topic, this PhD project takes a discursive perspective to explore this paradox. In other words, it examines how university professional and support staff discursively account for the persistent gender imbalance in their sector, with a particular focus on how they *talk themselves out of* acting to change the status quo, i.e. on discursive barriers to change.

A UK case-study university, whose staff gender-imbalanced profile is representative of the national picture, was selected as the epistemological site. Focus groups were conducted with female and male staff in administrative and secretarial occupations; interviews were carried out with managers who had progressed internally from administrative and secretarial roles, and with former employees of the case-study university. Data were analysed and interpreted from a critical realist, feminist perspective. Discourse analysis was conducted, with a specific focus on the functions, effects and implications of participants' situated use of gendered discourses and discursive constructions, and co-production of patterned accounts.

This thesis takes a much-needed step beyond deconstruction and critique of discursive barriers, towards promoting discursive reconstruction and change. It highlights participants' potentially emancipatory uses of counter-discourses, and provides recommendations for discursive change.

List of abbreviations

AUA: Association of University Administrators

CSU: Case Study University

ECU: Equality Challenge Unit

FG: Focus Group

G: Professional Grade at the Case Study University. These have been re-numbered to de-identify CSU. Grades frequently mentioned are: G2/G3; G4+; G4; G5; G6/G7.

HE: Higher Education

HEA: Higher Education Administration

HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency

KCTP: Key Career Transition Point (e.g. at CSU, recruitment into G2/G3 posts, progression between G3 and G4 and between G5 and G6 roles)

L: Leaver (ex-employee of the Case-Study University)

M: G4-G7 CSU Manager (Senior Administrator, Middle-/Team/ Senior Manager at the Case Study University)

PS: Professional and Support

PSS: Professional and Support Staff

UCU: University and College Union

Chapter 1. Introduction

UK universities as employers and educational establishments are considered to be at the forefront of equal opportunity policy and practice, complying with and often exceeding the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and the 2011 Public Sector Equality Duty. Notwithstanding this reputation, UK Higher Education (henceforth HE) is paradoxically characterised by stark gender (among other types of) imbalance in how its staff are distributed across roles and levels of seniority (ECU, 2016; cf. 1.1). HE's dominant 'rhetoric of collegiality' (Eveline, 2004: 137) and equality is also marred by a persisting 'them and us' divide (Conway & Dobson, 2003) or 'institutional apartheid' (Welton, 2013) between academics and those staff commonly known as "non-academic", but officially called Professional and Support (henceforth PS staff/PSS, cf. 2.2. for further discussion). The latter have often been relegated to the periphery as the 'second-class "support staff" citizens' (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009: 157) of academia, subordinate to the academic core.

The key motivation for this PhD study was to investigate what may lie behind the paradoxical persistence of the gender imbalance in the UK HE PS staff profile, in spite of the sector's reputation for being at the forefront of equality and diversity policy and practice. Taking a discursive approach, the study aimed to identify and critique discursive barriers to change. It focused on a specific female-dominated sub-group of the under-researched 'poor relations' of academic staff (McInnis, 1998): administrative and secretarial staff. The handful of studies on this HE PSS group define them as 'ivory basement workers' (Eveline, 2004), a 'forgotten workforce' treated in an 'almost feudal manner' (Castleman & Allen, 1995: 65; 69; also cf. Tong, 2014).

This introductory chapter provides the research background, rationale and agenda. Section 1.1 expands on the nature and extent of the gender imbalance in the PSS segment of UK HE. The rationale for this study and its focus on lower-level administrative and secretarial occupations are further elaborated upon in Section 1.2. After outlining the study's methodology, aims and proposed contribution (1.3), I conclude with a chapter outline of the thesis (1.4).

1.1. The gender-imbalanced profile of UK HE PS staff

Data returned by UK universities to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (henceforth HESA) and analysed by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU 2013; 2014a; 2015; 2016) show rather stable gender trends for PS staff, compared with their

academic counterparts. The proportions of female and male academics have been converging over the years, with female academic staff increasing from 40% in 2003/04 to 45% in 2014/15. In the same period, the proportion of female PSS remained almost static (62.2% in 2003/04; 62.7% in 2014/15; ECU, 2016: 199).

The fact that women make up the majority of PS staff has, until recently, resulted in a lack of analysis of more detailed data on the gender distribution of PS staff by occupation and level of seniority. When these data are considered, it becomes evident that the PS staff profile is gender-imbalanced. This gender imbalance is both horizontal, as women and men tend to work in different occupations (Hakim, 2004), and vertical, as women tend to be concentrated on lower levels, and men in senior roles (Ibid.), with percentages often indicative of occupational segregation¹.

Appendix A provides a detailed analysis of these data; only the main points of this analysis are reported upon here, starting with the vertical gender imbalance. 2014/15 sector-level data show that women were relatively over-represented on three out of four of the lowest PS staff levels (levels M-P; ECU, 2016: 210). In particular, they made up 70.7% and 67.4% of level M and N² employees respectively (Ibid). They were also relatively under-represented on all the 15 levels higher than L, accounting for only between 24.1% and 37.8% of the top four levels (Ibid).

This vertical gender imbalance is accompanied by a glaring horizontal gender imbalance. In the same academic year, almost half (42.7%) of all female PS staff (including 44.6% of all full-time and 39.9% of all part-time women in PS roles, ECU, 2016: 212-215) were clustered in one of nine occupational groups: administrative and secretarial occupations. These occupations, which account for almost one third of all PS staff, are thus sex-segregated (81.4% female; Ibid).

Part-time work is mostly done by female PS staff: in 2014/15, 40.9% of female PSS worked part-time, and part-time workers were 79.9% female (ECU, 2016: 204). As data analysed in Appendix A show in detail, part-time working does not, however, have a significant impact on the administrative and secretarial staff gender profile.

As should be expected, horizontal and vertical gender imbalances (as well as part-time working) lead to gender pay differences. HESA data on staff salary ranges

¹ Occupational segregation is identifiable when women or men make up at least 70% of workers in an occupation or on a specific level (Jacobs, 1993).

² Level M includes 'assistant professional staff, administrative staff' and is defined as 'typically an entry level professional, working under instruction from others within a defined area of work. [...] May supervise/assist/guide less experienced administrative staff (ECU, 2016: 16). Level N includes 'junior administrative staff, clerical staff, technician/craftsman, operatives', who normally work 'under closer supervision than level M staff but [are] experienced in specific areas of job role. Responsibility mainly for performing a range of simple, routine tasks within basic procedures and under regular supervision. (Ibid).

by gender and mode of working (not reported here, cf. ECU2016: 226) show that, generally speaking, men tend to fare substantially better than women in both full-time and part-time PS work, even though PSS pay is standardised and organised over 51 spine points with fixed increments (cf. Appendix B).

The 2011/12 – 2014/15 data (ECU, 2013; ECU, 2014a; ECU, 2015; ECU, 2016) presented in this section sketch a rather static picture. Recent studies (e.g. Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014; Strachan et al, 2013) show that Australian HE is characterised by a very similar gender imbalance, and less recent studies (e.g. Crawford and Tonkinson, 1988; Castleman and Allen, 1995; McLean, 1996) suggest that this situation has remained static for several years. Thirty years ago, Crawford and Tonkison stated that although general staff (i.e. PSS) women

constitute the single largest category of staff [...] it is only in number, however, that they predominate, since the great majority of female staff are concentrated in the lowest ranks (1988: 45).

Almost a decade later, Castleman & Allen (1995) urged universities to attend to what they defined as a forgotten, neglected and invisible workforce. Another ten years on, Eveline (2004) wrote about the 'ivory basement workers', mostly women, doing feminised, devalued work with few opportunities for development and advancement.

Aforementioned recent studies do acknowledge that women tend to be clustered on lower levels in administrative occupations, but their authors swiftly move on to discussing the scarcity of women in *senior* roles. For example, Simpson & Fitzgerald call for 'specific attention to be directed to the paucity of women at senior administrative levels' (2014: 1932). Wallace & Marchant, amongst others, had already done so, by focusing on an '*élite* cohort' of female administrative managers (2011: 570-1). After noting the paradoxical 'degree of segregation that remains in the face of the sector's gender equity initiatives', Strachan and colleagues focus exclusively on the vertical gender imbalance, 'with analysis of horizontal segregation to occur in subsequent analyses' (2013: 217) which have yet to be made available. The little attention that had been given to the 'forgotten workforce' has thus recently shifted towards senior female PS staff.

In the UK, administrative and secretarial staff have received even less attention than in Australia, except for a handful of articles written by female administrators themselves (e.g. Kelly & Leicester, 1996; Atkinson, 2001). In 2014, Tong completed a PhD study which is, to my knowledge, the only UK-based study dedicated to this female-dominated staff group. Tong tellingly describes these staff

by using Castleman & Allen's definition from twenty years previously – 'the forgotten workforce' – and argues that little has changed.

Castleman & Allen had also asked 'whether universities should be allowed to continue in such a way' (1995: 69). In light of the static data trends presented here (and supported by the scholarship reviewed in Chapter 2), the question that should be asked now is, arguably, *how* universities *have been* allowed to continue in such a way, especially in light of their reputation for being at the forefront of equality policy and practice. The next section (1.2) further elaborates on the rationale for asking this question and focusing on the 'forgotten workforce'. The following section (1.3) argues that, in order to provide a meaningful answer to this question, one that could promote change, this PhD project ought to adopt a different methodological and analytical approach from those of previous studies.

1.2. Rationale for the study

The rationale for researching gender-imbalanced or segregated occupations is manifold and has been discussed in depth elsewhere (e.g. Bradley, 1989; Walby, 1988; Williams, 1993a). The division of labour by sex has far-reaching and wide-ranging economic and social implications. The gender pay gap is one such implication, as occupations with a higher proportion of women tend to be paid consistently less than "men's work" (Ibid). HESA data show that female PSS are, generally speaking, paid less than their male counterparts (ECU, 2016: 226).

There are, nevertheless, reasons other than financial to study the gender-imbalanced PSS profile, and to focus on female-dominated administrative and secretarial occupations in particular. PSS are still the majority of staff in UK HE, although their proportion relative to their academic counterparts has been decreasing for the past eleven years (ECU, 2016: 26). As noted in 1.1, administrative and secretarial occupations are the biggest sub-group, accounting for almost a third of all PSS. These roles are female-dominated, and employ almost half of all female "non-academics". While PSS have been defined as the under-researched 'poor relations' (McInnis, 1998) of academics, the paucity of research on "non-academics" has recently been redressed to some extent (e.g. Witchurch 2008; 2013; cf. 2.2). Several studies are available on female administrative managers and/or the scarcity of women in senior PSS roles (e.g. Ledwith & Manfredi, 2000; Wallace & Marchant, 2011; cf. 2.3). Published studies about the biggest sub-group of the biggest occupational group in HE can, however, be counted on one hand; both hands if considering scholarship

from the UK, Australia and Canada (cf. 2.3 for further discussion). This is particularly interesting, considering that research is the “core business” of HE.

That some (female-dominated) HE staff sub-groups may be forgotten and more invisible than others deserves further consideration, as it is, arguably, part of what makes HE’s collegiality and equality just a ‘rhetoric’ (Eveline, 2004: 137). In Chapter 2, it is argued that the neglect of this staff group is, on the one hand, linked to the devaluation of “admin” work within the UK (and Australian) HE context, and not only in relation to the academic core. The relative lack of interest in the gender imbalance in “non-academic” roles is also related to women being over-represented in PS roles generally and in administrative and secretarial occupations in particular. The ‘misperception’ (Castleman and Allen, 1995: 69) that there are no “gender issues” in so-called female-dominated occupations is widespread.

On the contrary, over-representation is not always a sign of advantage: the gender imbalance is also a matter of value, and being clustered in devalued work is arguably the other side of the coin that is structural, systemic gender inequality. Research (also in HE studies) has tended to focus on the lack or scarcity of women at the top or in “men’s work”, aiming to understand barriers to women’s partaking in the more highly-valued and better-paid world of the professions, management and leadership. It is argued that these barriers can only be fully understood by simultaneously researching women’s concentration in lower-paid, less prestigious work. This study thus took a bottom-up approach, focusing on the structural issues affecting the “many”, rather than placing the spotlight on the “few” who have “made it to the top” despite the odds – in order to understand both as interrelated phenomena.

In addition to under- and over-representation (of women), there are two other “sides” to the gender imbalance and gender inequality generally speaking: women and men. In contrast to previous studies on lower-level administrative and secretarial occupations in HE (e.g. Castleman and Allen, 1995; Eveline, 2004), but in keeping with sociological studies of female-dominated occupations (cf. 3.1-3.3), this project also considered men working in these roles. Put differently, it theorised gender both in terms of sex/gender dualisms, e.g. the male/female binary, and as a structural principle for the organisation and allocation of work (cf. 4.1.3 for further discussion). This allowed for an exploration of the social (and discursive) construction of university administrative and secretarial work as “women’s work”, and its effects on ‘real women and men’ (Cameron 2003: 448).

As argued in 1.1, the horizontal and vertical gender imbalance in the PSS profile are interlinked: female-dominated administrative and secretarial occupations are located on the bottom rungs of the hierarchy. Conversely, focusing on these

female-dominated roles within the PSS category and on progression from them – or lack thereof – enabled this study to investigate both the horizontal and vertical imbalance, though exclusively within this PSS sub-group. The present study thus only considered those commonly known as generalist administrators³ and the generalist “career path” in Higher Education Administration (henceforth HEA), rather than the whole PSS category.

The ‘forgotten workforce’ doing administrative and secretarial work in UK HE deserves further study in its own right for several reasons. First of all, as McLean put it,

while it is important not to present academic and general staff women as competing priorities, universities need to recognise that strategies which improve the position of academic women do not necessarily improve the position of all women staff (1996: 26).

This is mainly because the nature of the gender imbalance is different, as is the value attributed to the work carried out by academic and administrative staff. Furthermore, neglecting the latter has wide-ranging consequences which affect *all* female HE staff:

the fact that many other women are employed by universities is usually overlooked – perhaps because many of them are working “below stairs” as cleaners and canteen staff, or behind desks as secretaries and administrators. [...] The perpetuation of “upstairs, downstairs” has serious consequences for the women below stairs [...] It also has serious consequences for the few women who have climbed upstairs and who do not “fit” (Kelly and Leicester, 1996: 118).

The ‘serious consequences’ Kelly & Leicester mention are usually noted by female administrators (also cf. Pearson, 2008), but tend to be overlooked by academic research. For example, while it is acknowledged that female academics tend to do more of the devalued, unrewarded “service” work in HE (Cotterill & Waterhouse, 2004; Guarino & Borden, 2016), this is rarely if ever understood as being related to the fact that the vast majority of university administrators and secretaries are women.

Introducing a special issue of the Gender, Work and Organization journal which featured research on female academics exclusively, Finch makes two fundamental points. The first is that making progress in gender equality in HE, which is responsible for the education of (young) adults, has the potential to be a lever for

³ This study did not consider ‘specialist administrators’ or ‘professional staff’. Specialist administrator/professional roles include roles which are recognised professions outside of HE (e.g. HR, IT, Marketing, Security etc.). ‘Generalist’ is instead a label for roles ‘specific’ to HE (e.g. in Registry, Academic Departments, Student Services etc.)

change elsewhere. The second point is, that gender equality in HE cannot be achieved until *all* staff are included, and *all* aspects of the gender imbalance are considered:

a university which is quite content to see all its secretaries as women with an unbreachable glass ceiling on their career opportunities [...] is unlikely to be able to make progress towards greater gender equality among its academic staff. The prospects for women in academe have to be seen as part of this bigger picture. In the present environment what those young people are learning is that, despite the apparent commitment to merit which lies at the heart of the academic project, and despite open and liberal cultures in universities, women are valued less highly than men [...] when the vast majority of people who deal with students from a position of authority and responsibility are men (Finch, 2003: 133-134).

In the same article, Finch mentions the establishment of the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) in 2001. The ECU has played a key role in stimulating increasing interest, if not specifically in the ‘forgotten workforce’, in PSS generally speaking. This culminated in the expansion of its Athena SWAN Charter in 2015, following the Gender Equality Charter Mark pilot, to include PSS in the award application process at both departmental and institutional level. The rationale for doing so was precisely to acknowledge that advancing gender equality means ensuring ‘representation, progression and success for *all*’ (ECU, 2017). Taking such a holistic approach to gender inequality in HE therefore also entails addressing the “them and us” divide which has so far ensured that “non-academic” staff, and female-dominated administrative and secretarial staff in particular, remained the ‘forgotten workforce’ of HE.

Due to the static gender trends presented so far, it is argued that a different approach should be taken to further our understanding of what lies behind the persistent gender imbalance in HEA, and move beyond the ‘cover of equality’ (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998: 803) in HE. In the next section, I introduce the rationale for adopting critical realist discourse analysis as a methodological and analytical approach. This approach was selected as it would enable this study to deconstruct such ‘rhetoric of collegiality’ (Eveline, 2004: 137) and equality, explore how this rhetoric is organised, and critique how it has ‘allowed universities to continue in such a way’ (Castleman and Allen 1995: 69) for another twenty years.

1.3. Methodological approach, research aims and proposed contribution

The methodological and analytical approach adopted was modelled on that of studies investigating a similar paradox, i.e. the persistence of gender inequality in allegedly

gender-egalitarian workplaces (e.g. Kelan, 2009a; Gill et al, 2017). These studies (reviewed in 3.4) focus on workers' patterned ways of accounting, for example, for the persistent lack of women in their profession. This discursive analytical approach is based on the premise that 'patterns of accounting or sense making are [...] one crucial facet of the reproduction of a labour market stratified by gender' (Wetherell et al, 1987: 59). Specifically, it is founded on a social constructionist view of language and language use, or discourse, as constitutive and as *doing* something, i.e. as a social practice (Burr, 2003; Cameron and Panović, 2014; cf. 4.1.2). The present study adopted a critical realist perspective, i.e. a 'non-relativist variety' of social constructionism (Willig, 1999: 39), aiming to deconstruct, explain and critique discursive constructions and patterns of accounting in terms of their material consequences and effects on 'real women and men' (Cameron 2003: 448).

This project shared its main research objective with the aforementioned discourse analytical studies (e.g. Kelan, 2009a), in that it did not intend to discover what HEA staff think the actual reasons behind the persistent gender imbalance are. Rather, it aimed to explore discursive barriers to change. Put differently, this study aimed to answer an overarching research question: how do HEA staff talk themselves out of (or into) acting to change the gender imbalance?

The overarching research question and its sub-questions (cf. 4.2.1) were addressed by conducting a critical realist version of discourse analysis (DA) on two data sets collected at a UK Case Study University (henceforth CSU). This university was selected as a case study due to, among other reasons (cf. 4.2.2), a gender-imbalanced PSS profile representative of the sector overall. The first, or main, data set consisted of nine focus groups with 36 CSU lower-level generalist administrators in administrative and secretarial occupations. The second, or supplementary, data set was made up of 20 individual interviews: 13 with CSU middle-/team and senior managers who had progressed internally from clerical grades, and seven with "leavers", i.e. former CSU generalist administrators/managers.

In line with the critical realist perspective adopted, the discourse analysis carried out on the two data sets focused on the effects and consequences of the local, situated discourses (or discursive constructions, cf. 4.1.2) and patterns of accounting for the gender imbalance in HEA. The attention was on how these 'open up or close down opportunities for action' (Willig, 2001: 111) and, therefore, potential change to the gender-imbalanced status quo. Furthermore, this study also aimed to deconstruct and critique the taken-for-grantedness of the horizontal and vertical gender imbalance in HEA, and of considering administrative and secretarial occupations as "women's work". This taken-for-grantedness was interpreted and critiqued as part of what has

'allowed [universities] to continue in such a way' (Castleman & Allen, 1995: 69). In doing so, this study proposed to make substantial contributions to the literature, by deepening current understanding of the barriers to gender equality in UK HEA, and illustrating how these are, at least partly, discursively constructed.

The study's contribution to the literature and methodology are discussed in detail in the thesis conclusion. As Yardley argues, qualitative research should have 'impact and utility', and this can also take the form of practical/socio-cultural implications, for example for communities or policy-making (Yardley, 2000: 219). In line with the social transformational aims of critical realist discursive research, this study aimed to 'have something to say about how things can be improved' (Willig, 1999: 48). Put differently, the ultimate objective of this study was to contribute to 'changing the way we [...] talk' (Yardley, 2000: 223) about HE administrative and secretarial staff and the gender imbalance in these roles.

In addition to deconstruction and critique of discursive barriers, this study thus also featured an element of *reconstruction*, in order to promote discursive change. Instances of potentially emancipatory use of counter-discourses in the data sets, as well as ways in which participants talk themselves into the need to act for change, are flagged up throughout the thesis and brought together in the conclusion (cf. Chapter 12). Recommendations for discursive change are provided, and will be (confidentially) fed to the CSU Equality Committee and Athena SWAN Team, as well as the Equality Challenge Unit.

Due to UK universities' increasing involvement with the ECU's Athena SWAN Charter, this study has implications which go beyond the Case Study University: its recommendations are broadly applicable to the sector at large, and there are plans to present them to the sector via a webinar in collaboration with ECU's Athena SWAN Team. It is argued that the sector could fruitfully engage in further discursive intervention and rediscursivisation activities, which are outlined in the thesis conclusion as potential directions for future research.

1.4. Thesis outline

After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 reviews previous scholarship on UK Higher Education administration. It provides a concise overview of recent developments in the sector, including an appraisal of the terminology debates about alternative definitions for "non-academic" staff. It draws parallels with the Australian HE system, due to the 'shared HE heritage' (Creagh & Graves, 2003: 48) and the scarcity of relevant UK-based studies about the female-dominated "forgotten workforce" of HE.

Chapter 3 reports on the second phase of the literature review, on female-dominated occupations. By appraising previous scholarship about women and men doing “feminised” occupations similar to those carried out by administrative and secretarial staff in HE, insights are gained into the social construction of women’s work. Studies taking a discursive approach to the study of gender-imbalanced occupations are also reviewed in this chapter, and the rationale for using a similar methodological approach is introduced here and elaborated upon in the following chapter.

After presenting the critical realist, feminist, discursive theoretical, methodological and analytical approach taken, Chapter 4 discusses the data collection methods, focus groups and interviews, as they were conducted at the Case-Study University selected as the epistemological site. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the two-stage, two-step data analysis and the “results”, thus also working as an introduction to the following “results” chapters (6-11).

These chapters provide analysis, deconstruction, interpretation and critique of the main thematic and discursive patterns in the data sets. Chapter 6 explores how the devaluation of university “admin” work is articulated in discourse; Chapter 7 focuses on participants’ discursive constructions of (lack of) progression in HEA. In Chapter 8, participants’ tendency to discursively feminise the ideal university admin worker when accounting for the horizontal gender imbalance is discussed. Chapter 9 looks at how the devaluation of admin work is discursively gendered when accounting for the vertical gender imbalance. In Chapter 10, a critique is offered of participants’ patterned ways to account for the imbalance which eventually work to repudiate gender inequality and reinforce HEA’s construction as a family/female-friendly, egalitarian and meritocratic sector in spite of the gender imbalance. Finally, the last “results” chapter, Chapter 11, provides an overview of participants’ patterned ways to argue for change to the gender imbalance.

Chapter 12 is the thesis conclusion. It provides a summary of the discursive barriers to change, flags up potentially emancipatory counter-discourses, and outlines this study’s recommendations for discursive change.

Chapter 2. Literature Review (1): UK Higher Education Administration

This chapter provides a review of relevant scholarship on UK Higher Education Administration (HEA). Section 2.1 offers a brief and selective account of recent developments in UK HE(A). Section 2.2 reports on the terminology debates around alternative definitions for “non-academic” staff, reflecting on the devaluation of the terms administration and administrator in the UK (and Australian) HE context. This sets the scene for an overview of the handful of studies on gender and university administrative and secretarial staff (cf. 2.3)

2.1. Recent developments in UK HE(A)

UK HE and HEA as we know them today have been shaped by various social, political and economic processes, a detailed explanation of which is beyond the purposes of this section. There is no shortage of studies on the effects of the ‘neoliberal agenda’ (Szekers, 2004: 8) on academia, and in particular on how massification, marketization, corporatisation and increasing managerialism (e.g. Davies et al, 2006; Deem, 2004; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2013; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Mautner, 2005; McGettigan, 2013; Peters & Roberts, 2000) have resulted in the ‘McDonaldization’ of HE (Hayes & Wynyard, 2002).

The neoliberal agenda in UK HE has intensified since the Thatcher government, which aimed to ‘bring higher education institutions closer to the world of business’ (1987 White Paper, cited in Jenkins, 1995). The two main economic arguments made were that

governments’ budgets could not cope with the massive expansion of the university system in the post-war period; and [...] universities could be run much more efficiently (where efficiency is equated with doing more with less), by replacing the unbusinesslike collegial system of university government by a form of managerialism modelled on that of the private sector (Davies et al, 2006: 302).

The new public management system introduced involved measurable performance outputs, strategic plans, quality audits, a culture of competitiveness, entrepreneurship and accountability (Ollsen & Peters, 2005). As tuition fees were introduced in 1997⁴ to make up for major cuts in public funding, university staff became accountable to students-as-customers (in addition to the government and taxpayers) for the quantity

⁴ Followed by variable tuition fees in 2006/7, further increased in 2010.

and quality of their “products”, “outputs” and “services”, in terms of the market principle of “value for money”.

As a result of her analysis of the phrase ‘entrepreneurial university’ (coined by Clark, 1998) in contemporary HE discourse, Mautner argues that ‘entrepreneurial’ is a keyword reflecting ‘the colonisation of academia by the market’ (2005: 95). Its use also encompasses ‘aspects of organisational culture, in particular a rallying around values such as efficiency, dynamism, and innovation’ (2005: 103). She concludes that ‘going entrepreneurial’ for the neoliberal university means

more than just commercialisation. [...] It is conceptualised as a pervasive institutional transformation targeting staff and students, and aiming to achieve in them not just behavioural, but also cognitive and “emotional” changes’ (Ibid: 106).

Critiques of the neoliberal, entrepreneurial university have recently focused on these ‘emotional’ changes and aspects of organisational culture (e.g. Davies & Bansel, 2005; Davies et al, 2006; Gill, 2010; Gill & Donaghue 2016). Put differently, they have examined the ‘psychic life’ of the ‘neoliberal self’ as an ‘entrepreneurial subject’, i.e. how neoliberalism ‘is lived out’ (Scharff, 2016: 107) in academia. Academic workers are ‘exhorted to become autonomous, choosing, self-managing and self-improving subjects’ (Gill & Donaghue, 2016: 92) not only in the ways they work, “produce outputs” and (economic) value, but also in how they cope with the ‘hidden injuries of the neoliberal university’ (Gill, 2010). These are, in other words, the ‘psychosocial costs’ of the ‘intensification and extensification of work’, increasing levels of performance management, surveillance, casualisation and precariousness (Gill & Donaghue, 2016: 91-2; 97), such as ‘exhaustion, chronic stress, shame, anxiety, insecurity, ill health’ (Gill, 2014b: 13).

The effects of the neoliberal agenda on “non-academic” HE workers have not been discussed to the same extent (though cf. Szekeres, 2004). Commentators have tended to focus on the exponential growth, since the 1960s, in the number of staff required to support and manage increasingly complex organisations, procedures and services. From just 285 in 1949/50, “non-academics” increased to 2,830 in 1970 (Kitchen and Lauwerys, 1986: 68) and reached a record 205,835 in 2009/10 (ECU: 2016: 26). Although their proportion relative to academic staff has been decreasing since then, “non-academics” are still the majority of HE staff (though only just: 50.9% in 2014/15; Ibid).

The neoliberal agenda affected the type of roles carried out ‘beyond the limelight’ to support the ‘main academic act’ (Bosworth, 1986; Holmes, 1998; Pitman,

2000). In the 1980s, Bosworth commented that administrators were no longer 'gifted amateurs' mainly drawn from the ranks of Arts & Humanities graduates and given on the job training. Training schemes were being introduced, including not only word and data processing but also management training for those administrators climbing the ladder. One of the milestones in the establishment of "career administration" in UK HE was the foundation, in 1973, of the Conference of University Administrators (CUA – formerly the Meeting of University Academic Administrative Staff), which later developed into the Association of University Administrators (AUA).

Administrators acquired tasks that academics were no longer able to perform due to increased workloads. Brand new roles were created to suit the needs of the expanding sector (Wild and Wooldridge, 2009). Alongside 'generalist administrators'⁵, 'specialist administrators' or professionals were brought in to staff newly established departments, of strategic importance to the new public management system, such as Marketing & Recruitment, Outreach & Widening Participation, Business Development etc. (Whitchurch, 2008). As the neoliberal university 'was suddenly faced with severe managerial problems requiring managerial solutions' (Whitchurch, 2004a: 284, citing Hayward, 1992), it also required a new class of middle- and senior managers with business acumen and experience to advise senior academic staff in charge of university governance.

The shift to new public management was also characterised by a split between professional/administrative management on the one hand, and the 'academic civil service' (Lockwood, 1986: 81) component of administration on the other. Whitchurch defines the professional/administrative manager as a 'third-space'/'blended' professional, able to cross the academic/administrative divide and build a business-like portfolio of activities based on contacts often acquired outside the HE sector (2008; 2013). The academic civil service component of administration, or in other words the role of 'guardians of the regulations' (Barnett, 2000: 133), was instead retained by those who within the UK HE context are commonly known as "admin" or "support" staff (cf. 2.2): "lower-level" generalist administrators or 'administrative and secretarial' staff (to use HESA terminology, cf. 1.1). It is in this staff grouping that the image of the passive, silent, and invisible adviser that had been the defining feature of the "good administrator" until the last decade of the 20th century (Bosworth, 1986) appears to have survived. Borne out of the traditional figure of the civil servant, the 'subservient' university administrator was 'supposed to be seen and not heard' whilst

⁵ Generalist is a label for HE-specific roles, e.g. in Registry, academic departments, Student Services etc., whereas specialist or professional roles also exist outside of HE as recognised professions (e.g. HR, IT, Marketing etc.).

servicing committees and meetings (Lauwerys, 2002: 94-5), a 'docile clerk' (Scott, 1995: 64) whose only role was to provide advice on rules and regulations when requested.

Recently, several HE commentators have discussed the passive, silent and invisible administrator only to point out how at odds this image is with the figure of the pro-active, corporate professional/administrative manager, heavily involved in institutional policy and strategy (e.g. Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014). A few have used this image to describe today's 'academic civil servants', i.e. 'those bearing responsibility for the more *routine* aspects of administering academic institutions, [... e.g.] servicing committees or examination boards' (Barnett, 1993: 188, emphasis added). Whitchurch (2008) defines these as 'bounded professionals', and describes their work as a blend of 'soft' and 'hard' administration: caring and student/customer-oriented on the one hand, and often inflexible in the application of rules and regulations on the other. She notes that 'such [bounded] approaches have become *devalued* in contemporary contexts as being overly procedural, paralleling *the downgrading of the concept of administration*' (2013: 9, emphasis added).

The "non-academic" side of HE is thus not a homogenous, unproblematic or uncontested occupational category, although it is often treated as such (cf. Szekeres, 2004, for a critique). The next section discusses some recent terminology debates in the UK and Australia, due to their 'shared HE heritage' (Creagh & Graves, 2003: 48; Sharrock, 2000), and discusses the concurrent 'downgrading of the concept of administration' (Whitchurch, 2013: 9).

2.2. From "non-academics" to "professional staff" via the devaluation of "administration"

'Traditionally in HE, there have been only two categories of staff: academics and everyone else' (Gornall, 1999: 44). More recently, the use of the term "non-academic" to denote staff who do not teach or conduct research has been criticised as an "othering" practice:

*I do wish you would stop referring to me and my colleagues as non-persons who do non-work. [...] Most of my colleagues prefer to be referred as general staff*⁶ (Moodie, 1996: 32)

"Non-academic" staff now make up the majority of staff in higher education in Australia, yet they are defined by what they do not do, rather than by what they do. It is sometimes suggested, often only half-jokingly,

⁶ The preferred terminology in Australian HE in the 1990s/2000s.

that academic staff should be called non-general staff, which when you think about it, is also a technically correct term. (Conway, 2000: 200)

The use of this terminology [i.e. “non-academic”] might also suggest a perception that the work undertaken by administrators is neither important nor difficult, and not deserving of any special recognition. (Conway and Dobson, 2003: 125)

The negative labelling suggests that “non-academic” work, carried out backstage, is subordinate and ancillary to academic work as the ‘core mission’ of HE, the ‘main act’ carried out in the limelight (Bosworth, 1986; also cf. Conway & Dobson, 2003; Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014).

The academic/non-academic opposition has been variously defined as the ‘them and us divide’ (Dobson, 2000), the ‘faculty/staff divide’ (Losinger, 2015), the ‘iron curtain’ (Eveline, 2004), the ‘academic apartheid’ (Wallace & Marchant, 2011) and the ‘caste ceiling’ (Krug, 2015). This divide seems to have survived the evolution and, as some argue (e.g. Holmes, 1998; Moodie, 1995), the professionalization of HEA through the decades. Disparaging comments against “non-academics” are made today as they were in the 1960s:

The really lifeless thing is administration as it is understood and practised... You will find yourself entangled in a babu system, where 30% error is accepted and anything less becomes matter for modest self-congratulations (Dundonald, 1962, cited in Holmes, 1998: 111)

Let's be clear of one thing, a University Academic is different from a University non-academic who holds a degree. [...] The latter supports the former and should seek only to serve their needs (a reader's comment to Knight, 2017)

Houck (1990) defined HE as a feudal society where senior academics are the barons; Kelly and Leicester (1996) compared the university to a Victorian household, where administrative and secretarial staff are kept ‘downstairs’ with cleaning and catering staff. Recently, academics and administrators have been described as two tribes that apparently cannot rub along (Taylor, 2015), inhabiting ‘two parallel universes that have little point of contact’ (THE, 2016). Although some academics still express strong feelings against what they define as ‘pointless admin’, ‘bullshit jobs’ (Spicer, 2017), others have instead publicly contested the ‘them and us’ divide (e.g. Knight, 2017; Welton, 2013).

Commentators (especially “non-academic”, e.g. Crawford and Tonkinson, 1988; Burton, 1997; Looker, 1993; McLean, 1996; Tong, 2014) have noted how the ‘them and us’ divide has resulted in, and is in turn reinforced by, different terms and

conditions of employment for academic and “non-academic” staff. For example, academics generally enjoy better provision of pay and benefits, leave, training, and informal flexible working. “Non-academic” jobs also tend to be seen exclusively as a cost, and therefore are often ‘first for the chop’, as Greatrix (2017) puts it.

This has led some scholars to describe “non-academic” staff as the ‘second-class “support staff” citizens’ (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009: 157) working in the ‘periphery’ to support the academic ‘core’ (Ibid.), the ‘invisible workers’ (Szekeres, 2004: 1), the under-researched ‘poor relations’ of academic staff:

There has been remarkably little systematic study of the roles and values of university administrative staff. Indeed, our knowledge of the Australian professional administrators is virtually nil, since they 'have traditionally been treated as the “poor relations” of the university system, not worthy of sustained research or analysis by academics or management’ (Mcinnis, 1998: 161-2, citing Evatt Foundation, 1994).

The fact that “non-academic” staff are under-researched is thus attributable to the widely held opinion that “non-academic” work is less important and therefore not worthy of academic enquiry.

The dearth of research on “non-academic” staff has been recently redressed to a certain extent, mainly by “non-academic” writers aiming to re-define this HE staff group. The first step was to discard the label “non-academic”, due to its negative connotations. The terms “administration”/“administrator” were not, however, universally accepted as suitable alternatives. In the UK, arguments in favour of using “management”/“manager” instead of “administration”/“administrator” took place mainly in Perspectives, the Journal of the Association of University Administrators (AUA), and other publications by Whitchurch.

Whitchurch explains how ‘administration’ has become a ‘fuzzy concept’ (Barnett, 1993: 183):

As administration [...] evolved into management [...] and] the term “management” gained currency, ideas and understandings of “administration” became less well defined. The term “administrator” could extend from low-level clerking or processing roles to very senior, decision-making positions, with a range of generalist and specialist functions in between (Whitchurch, 2007: 54)

The author appears to attribute this fuzziness to the fact that “administration” is used to refer to both ‘academic civil service’ (i.e. administrative and secretarial occupations) and (senior) professional/administrative management. Elsewhere, she argues that the ‘downgrading’ of the term ‘administration’ can be attributed to its association with

what she defines as 'routine clerical' work:

[Administration is] being used increasingly to refer to procedural and even clerical tasks, carrying implications of unwanted bureaucracy (Whitchurch, 2013: 6)

The term 'administrator' has become devalued in the sense that [...] it now refers more often than not to routine clerical tasks. Secretarial staff have become 'administrative assistants', and faculty registrars are now given more "managerial" titles such as 'business manager' (Whitchurch, 2004a: 282-3)

Whitchurch does not further investigate the reasons behind this devaluation, as though clerical tasks were mundane and demeaning enough to downgrade anything that may be associated with them.

If administration/administrator are devalued terms⁷, it is not surprising that some 'rebadging' (Whitchurch, 2006: 8) has been taking place. Hamer (1997) discusses why he thinks administrators are managers, and therefore why the AUA should have amended its name to reflect this. Lauwerys (2002) also argues in favour of discarding the label administration and replacing it with management, in order to enhance the credibility and attractiveness of this "profession"⁸. This, he argues, would dissociate it from the figure of the subservient, second-class administrator belonging to the 'Civil Service mould' (Ibid: 93-4).

Whitchurch suggests abandoning the terms administration and administrator in favour of a hybrid category, that of 'administrative management', which she describes as entailing

making and implementing decisions through a process of continuous, evidence-based analysis, joining the creativity of developing policy with the craftsmanship of presenting and explaining it, and the political skill required to defend it [...] An alternative description for university administrators might be as 'knowledge managers' (Whitchurch 2004b: 1).

In her work, Whitchurch uses the label professional/administrative manager (similarly to HESA: managers and non-academic professionals) to denote specialist staff (e.g. HR, IT etc.) and general staff with line/team/senior management responsibilities. This purposely excludes

staff on clerical grades (although the latter could include people who might in future move to a professional or management grade) (2006: 6).

⁷ Though this is certainly not the case in the USA, where the term 'administrator' denotes senior (academic) leadership roles.

⁸ University administration/management is not a recognised profession.

These staff 'on clerical grades' are however left without a clear nomenclature – apart from 'routine clerical' workers – and are not the concern of Whitchurch's research.

Whitchurch has a point when she states that 'HESA's employment-related categories do not provide an easy fit with staff groupings in UK Higher Education' (2013: 12). Arguably however, nor do hers, or those provided by the AUA's journal 'Perspectives', where administration/administrator often appear alongside management/managers, as though they were interchangeable. Administrative and secretarial workers might struggle to identify themselves in the pages of the AUA's publication, especially when their work is described as 'merely clerical' (Child & Lander, 2008: 42), 'just a clerical [...] function' (Langley 2012: 71) or 'routine' (Whitchurch, 2007: 56).

Commenting on the administrator/manager debate from Australia, Conway mentions the 'stereotyping and baggage' of the term 'administrator' and the 'prestige cringe' (2000: 200) when those who consider themselves managers are called administrators. Speaking of the change of name of AITEA (the Australian Institute of Tertiary Education Administrators) to ATEM (the Association for Tertiary Education Management) Conway concludes that there was 'more agreement about what most administrators do – manage – than there was about whether administrators or managers was correct or better terminology', and that 'we should call ourselves administrators and be done with it' (2000: 200). Only a few years later however, ATEM decided to adopt professional staff as their preferred terminology.

The labels professional/professional and support have indeed gradually (at least officially) replaced other alternatives (e.g. academic-related, allied, general) as the preferred terminology both in UK (apart from HESA) and Australian HE. Sebalj and colleagues (2012) state that the label professional had 'been gaining momentum' since the mid-2000s. The results of their survey, conducted with research management and administration staff, show that some consider 'administrative staff' as

demeaning terminology which d[oes] not adequately describe the breadth and depth of work roles or accountabilities nor the critical thinking and analysis performed by respondents on higher salary levels in particular (Ibid: 465).

The authors thus propose a new 'nomenclature ladder'

in order to build profile, recognition and occupational gravitas of the professional staff group [...] and provide a schema to address the 'Administrative/Administrator' equals 'inferior' perspective (Ibid: 468).

The label professional can thus be interpreted as the result of another 'rebadging' exercise, carried out to elude the devaluation of administration as 'routine clerical' work.

The UK research administrators and managers interviewed by Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2009) also attempt to distance themselves from the 'secretarial dross' and the 'secretarial mundanities' characterising the work of the 'women administrators in Registry' (Allen-Collinson, 2007: 302). They talk about their own roles as involving 'more cognitively demanding' activities, and requiring 'particular specialist skills [...] at times analogous to academic work' (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009: 149). One of them states:

It's important to me to have my [academic] books near me. It reminds me of who I really am [...] I guess what I'm saying is "Look, I'm more than just a person who just happens to be working in administration at the moment. I have interests too, like you lot [academics]" (Ibid.)

What the terminology debates in UK and Australian HE suggest is that the 'them and us divide' does not only characterise academic-"non-academic" staff relations, but also relations within the "non-academic"/PSS group. Rebadging involved some – not all – "non-academic" staff; it was achieved not only by striving towards professionalism and crossing the academic/non-academic divide, but also by distancing one's work from 'administration', devalued as 'secretarial dross' and 'routine clerical tasks'.

If some claim that all "non-academic" workers are invisible (e.g. Szekeres, 2004) by virtue of their being "non-academic", it is argued here, with other scholars (e.g. Castleman and Allen, 1995, McLean, 1996, Tong, 2014), that some "non-academic" workers have been more invisible and forgotten than others. This study focuses on one such invisible "non-academic" staff sub-group⁹, variously defined as lower-level generalist administrators, "admin", 'routine clerical' workers, and administrative and secretarial staff. These staff have not only been left out of (or rather, been the cause of) the afore-mentioned rebadging exercises, but also excluded from the vast majority of academic and "professional" research on "non-academic" staff. Their invisibility is worsened by the apparent lack of consistency in

⁹ Acknowledging that there are other, even more invisible, groups, e.g. "manual" workers such as cleaning, security, catering and portering staff, whose work is often conducted outside office hours, before or after most other staff have arrived at or left the university (a point also made by Losinger, 2015). At CSU, some of these staff groups were outsourced: no longer employed directly by the university, they are on different terms and conditions. Some have argued (e.g. Conway, 2000) that this might be administrative and secretarial workers' future too.

their categorisation. Administrators for some, clerical/secretarial staff for others, it is not easy to locate them in the data or the literature. As the handful of academic studies dedicated to this staff category, reviewed in the next section, all point out – whereas the studies excluding them do not – this is a female-“dominated” workforce, with few development and progression opportunities.

2.3. The invisible, forgotten, female-dominated workforce of HE

Finding literature about the invisible, ‘forgotten workforce’ (Castleman and Allen, 1995: 65) was not an easy endeavour. As all the scholars who have written about the topic noted (e.g. Strachan et al, 2013; Tong, 2014), the vast majority of HE studies have been so far conducted on (female) academics, managers and leaders (e.g. Bagilhole & Goode 2001; Bagilhole & White, 2011; Bailyn 2003; Benschop & Brouns 2003; Deem 2003; Knights & Richards 2003; Morley 1998; Ledwith & Manfredi, 2000; White et al, 2012). Due to the afore-mentioned ‘fuzzy’, inconsistent terminology (cf. 2.2), research which promises to be about administration often turns out to be about management and leadership (e.g. Cassin, 2004; Doyle Walton, 1996). Similarly, research about women, gender, gendered work, motherhood and “non-motherhood” in HE or universities frequently concerns academic women only (e.g. Barnes-Powell & Letherby, 1998; Bird, 2011; Munn-Giddins; 1998; Reimer ed., 2004; Roos and Gatta, 2009).

Even studies about the ‘invisible workers’ (e.g. Szekeres, 2004) in the “ivory basement” (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2012) and about ‘not male and not academic’ staff (Wallace & Marchant, 2011) paradoxically consider the administrative and secretarial staff sub-group in little or no detail. Wallace and Marchant, for example, talk about female administrative managers as ‘doubly marginalised’ only to shortly afterwards describe their ‘population of interest’ as an ‘élite cohort’ (2011: 570-1), and state that further research should ‘include female administrative staff from lower levels and also conduct comparisons with males’ (Ibid: 566).

Fitzgerald (2012) borrows Eveline’s ‘ivory basement’ metaphor to refer to female academics and *leaders*, whom she locates there supposedly by virtue of their being female¹⁰. However, Eveline (2004) originally used this metaphor to denote the subordinate position of lower-level generalist admin staff and other predominantly female staff, e.g. casual tutors and research assistants, in the ivory tower. The only reference Fitzgerald makes to administrative work that might remotely apply to lower-level generalist administrators is to the ‘*administrivia* that new managerialism

¹⁰ Brabazon (2014) also appears to misinterpret Eveline’s metaphor.

demands, compulsive institutional housekeeping' (2012: 121). However, this is mentioned as a feature of female academics and leaders' work and workplace. So is, paradoxically, the "glass ceiling" for 'women administrators':

women academics inhabit a particularly complex organisation that does not appear to render problematic the almost unbreachable and unreachable glass ceiling that is in place for women administrators (e.g. executive assistants and school managers) on the one hand, yet on the other proclaims its diversity and inclusiveness on its marketing and promotions material (Ibid:133).

The dearth of scholarship on gender and UK lower-level university administration made the first phase of this study's literature review particularly challenging. In 2013/14, the only UK-based studies I was able to locate, remotely related to the topic, were: Gander (2010), focusing on the under-representation of women in management and leadership, and Smith (2009), analysing differences and similarities in (female) academics' and administrators' work satisfaction levels at a case study university. Smith interestingly concludes that because they are rather segregated from their male counterparts – who are either in other occupations or higher up the hierarchy – lower-level female administrators paradoxically display higher levels of work satisfaction. This is despite a gender pay gap which is nearly four times greater than their academic counterparts'.

The first draft of this first phase of literature review was therefore mainly based on Australian studies: Crawford and Tonkinson (1988); Castleman and Allen (1995); McLean (1996); Burton (1997); Eveline (2004); Strachan et al. (2013); Simpson and Fitzgerald (2014). When the second draft of this literature review was prepared in 2017, more UK-based studies were found, either because they were conducted after 2013, or because they were referenced in more recent non-UK studies which I had come across via other studies, or at times purely by chance¹¹.

This section brings together these two reviews of available literature specifically focusing on gender and lower-level generalist administration, and flags up recurrent themes for further investigation: devaluation and invisibility; "women's work"; the 'them and us' divide, and lack of development and progression opportunities. These themes are touched upon by earlier as well as recent studies,

¹¹ For example, Tong's unpublished PhD study (2014) was recommended to me by the Gender, Work and Organisation conference organiser Deborah Kerfoot; I came across ECU's report on occupational segregation in Scottish Higher Education (2014b) when I was employed by ECU in 2016/17, which is also when I was introduced by a colleague to Catherine Butler's blog (2014); Atkinson (2001), Kelly & Leicester (1996) and Wilkins (1998) are referenced by Tong (2014) and Losinger (2015). The latter also refers to the other two Canadian studies mentioned here (Looker, 1993; Pearson, 2008).

suggesting that little has changed for this mostly female workforce in the past 30 years.

Today, lower-level administrators might no longer, at least officially, be called 'secretaries' as they were in the 1980/90s, but 'the negative perceptions of administrative work remain' (Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014: 1937). In the 1980s as in the 2010s, lower-level administrators and their work are talked about as forgotten, neglected and invisible (Castleman and Allen, 1995; Tong, 2014), undervalued, unrecognised and poorly treated (MacLean, 1996); 'underpaid and overlooked' (Atkinson, 2001: 1); taken for granted, 'rarely recognised and poorly rewarded' (Eveline, 2004: 159); devalued, disrespected (Pearson, 2008); hidden (Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014). In the 1980s as in the 2010s, this work was and is mostly done by women, its devaluation and invisibility not unrelated to its being "women's work" (Castleman and Allen, 1995), and certainly linked to its location on the lowest steps of the HEA ladder.

The UK HE administrators and managers in Tong's study consistently flag up the devaluation of clerical/administrative work, seen as work 'anyone can do', 'unskilled', 'menial' and for "thick people" (2014: 173), and the consequent devaluation of those who do it as 'second-class citizens' and 'unimportant background workers' (Ibid.). This devaluation, the author argues, constructs a 'concrete ceiling for admin and clerical staff which ensures they remain firmly in their place' (Ibid: 170), especially if they work part-time.

Several of the studies reviewed note how all these themes (devaluation and invisibility, "women's work", lack of progression, and a divisive HE 'them and us' culture) interplay with each other as cause and consequence of lower-level administrators' position in the "ivory basement" (Eveline, 2004). Academia's 'endemic, institutionalised base of sexism, racism, class snobbery and intellectual elitism' (Atkinson, 2001: 1), hidden behind a rhetoric of collegiality, meritocracy and commitment to equality and diversity (Eveline, 2004, amongst many others) thus forms an intricate web which has so far proven difficult to challenge.

In her 2004 monograph, Eveline dedicates two chapters to the two cultural audits conducted at the University of Western Australia: a review of the position of women academic staff (1995) and a review of the position of women general staff (1997). She notes what she describes as a lack of interest, debate, and follow-up to the report on women general staff, even resentment from male and female academics. This she attributes to the report being perceived as of 'less value' (2004: 132), and interprets as evidence of the 'existence of two (at least) cultural identities within the university' (Ibid: 133): the tower and the basement, separated by a status-

based 'iron curtain'. She concludes that 'privileging the gender issues for one group of women' is part of what keeps 'the relationship between tower and basement [...] in place' (Ibid: 136).

Other scholars do not appear to make sense of the 'them and us' divide as gender- (as well as status-)based. For example, Dobson states that the aforementioned review of the position of women general staff 'arguably put the cart before the horse':

those designing the Review had decided there were cultural and structural barriers to women, before undertaking the analysis necessary to see if such barriers existed [...] The most interesting outcome of The Review was that UWA's female general staff believed that in most instances, the issue of gender was less of a barrier to their aspirations than the fact that they were members of the general staff! [...] Women on the general staff were highly critical of the academic staff. Academic staff at UWA, it seemed, even had exclusive rights to the best parking spots! (2000: 245-6)

What Dobson seems to miss, in his highly sarcastic appraisal of the review, is that the apparently trivial issue of the 'parking spots'¹² was symptomatic of deeper cultural issues. It was, in other words, a manifestation of the 'them and us' divide (as Dobson himself defines it), of the differential treatment that HE staff groups received.

That a mostly female workforce might make sense of their invisibility and devaluation as exclusively status- rather than status- *and* gender-based might be linked, as Smith (2009, cf. above) demonstrated, to their being in a mostly female rather than mixed environment. The vertical gender imbalance in the academic hierarchy is more readily – though not universally – acknowledged as a "gender issue", because women academics do the same type of work as their male counterparts. Dobson (cf. above) challenges the existence of 'structural barriers' for women general staff in a sector characterised by both horizontal and vertical gender imbalance, verging on segregation; a sector where women tend not to do the same work as men (cf. 1.1). Dobson's critique can only make sense if the over-representation of women in devalued clerical work is not understood as a "gender issue" – or as an issue at all.

That "gender" may not matter in female-"dominated" occupations such as lower-level university administration appears to be a widespread assumption. For example, Castleman and Allen (1995) noted a tendency amongst managers to overlook general staff when responding to their questions about gender – as if those

¹² General staff were not allowed to use the most conveniently accessible parking spots, as these were reserved to academics.

questions were only applicable to academic staff. The authors observed the same 'misperception' (Ibid: 69) in affirmative action and equal employment opportunity programmes (also cf. Burton, 1997¹³) which often neglect this predominantly female workforce.

With Eveline (2004) and Tong (2014), among others, it is argued that the devalued and subordinate position of lower-level administrative and secretarial staff may be best understood at the intersection of gender- and status-based disadvantage. First of all, this female-"dominated" workforce supports a workforce of academic and professional managers which is male-dominated at the top (as HESA data show, cf. ECU, 2016). Secondly, they have few development and progression opportunities to join less female-heavy areas and levels of work. Strachan and colleagues (2013) argue that the vertical imbalance in Australian HEA (strikingly similar to UK HEA's) is partly related to women's tendency to enter HEA on lower levels and, once in, to experience "non-progression" on lower levels than their male colleagues. Several of the studies reviewed (e.g. Eveline, 2004) suggest that the lack of development and progression opportunities afforded to those who do "ivory basement work" is linked to its invisibility and devaluation.

Last, but not least, lower-level administrative and secretarial staff carry out support, 'glue' work which, Eveline argues, is feminised, i.e. considered as 'women's work':

the organisation of university life is dependent on that work, on the extent to which it is feminised, and on the relational aspects of it being done so well that it disappears from sight. [...] to maintain a system which advantages those in the tower, universities depend on basement practices and skills that remain unseen, relatively unrewarded, and are judged insignificant and extraneous [...] and] expected to be done so well that they require no attention from academic staff. Indeed, as with household work, they are considered to be done best when they are not noticed at all (2004: 138-9; 141)

That the housework of universities is mostly done by women is thus no coincidence, but, rather, an integral part of the ivory tower "culture". This is a point made by female lower-level administrators themselves:

There are so many women at level 4 and 5 where you get treated badly in lots of ways, and it is a big part of the culture to have women in those positions and keep them in their place (female Departmental Secretary, cited in Crawford and Tomlinson, 1988: 64-5)

¹³ Burton notes that 'in at least one university, at the time of an Equity Review, general staff were not listed as staff members in the university handbook' (1997: 72).

How many of us have experienced the creation of the professor's secretary as the housekeeper, the guardian of the keys? Who creates and sustains that role for her within the department? (Kelly and Leicester, 1996: 121)

If we in the gendered underworld value our work, why is it that our bosses and supervisors trivialise what we do? Certainly, gender issues play a significant role. [...] It would seem that our work, as opposed to that of the female faculty, has not surged forward into the world of authenticated value. Rather, the support staff role is congruent with that of the old-fashioned housewife: an overshadowed identity that is quietly and inconspicuously supportive [...] the history of devaluation continues in a straight line: these are 'women workers' jobs and therefore preconceived as 'easy to do', 'requiring very little mental ability' (Pearson, 2008: 133-4; 139)

In light of the findings from her national survey and interviews with UK lower-level administrators and managers who progressed from clerical grades, Tong concludes that

clerical and administrative staff remain a forgotten workforce, by-passed by the equality agenda and disadvantaged in a number of ways by their gender and class position within the organisational hierarchy (2014: 274).

She also observes that little appears to have changed since Castleman and Allen, twenty years previously, had stated:

it is indeed ironic, if not shameful, that universities, which are devoted to the advancement of knowledge and claim leadership in social and intellectual matters, should have within their midst a group of workers who are often treated in an almost feudal manner and to whose education and career development little attention seems to have been devoted [...] The question must be asked whether universities should be allowed to continue in such a way (1995: 69)

As universities so far seem to *have been* allowed to continue in such a way, the present study sought to explore *how*, in order to promote change.

2.4. Conclusion

The first phase of this study's literature review identified recurrent themes in the handful of studies which considered female-dominated HE administrative and secretarial staff: devaluation and invisibility, women's work, lack of progression and development opportunities, and a 'them and us' divide with both academic and management/professional staff.

The scarcity of academic scholarship available on this HE staff grouping and the relative lack of action on the part of universities to change their situation in the

past twenty to thirty years were discussed. These were interpreted as the result of this HE staff sub-group being a predominantly female workforce doing devalued, 'routine clerical' work, considered as subordinate to the academic/management core of HE. The following quote by Pearson – a university administrator – supports this claim. Pearson argues that, due to the 'them and us' divide, even feminist academic research about HE has mostly glossed over, therefore reinforcing, the invisibility and devaluation of female-dominated administrative and secretarial work and workers:

We are support staff and 'they' are faculty. [...] We have been left trapped in a humiliating stereotype as lower-class females with no mental acumen. The feminist movement has become irrelevant to our professional needs. Intellectual honesty demands that the study of the complexity of our work, the knowledge needed to do the work and the knowledge gained by the work itself should involve serious feminist reflection. It is time to make the invisible work we do visible (2008: 137-8)

The literature reviewed in 2.3 is mainly made up of individual articles and book chapters in publications which otherwise ignore the topic altogether (the only exceptions being Eveline, 2004 and Tong's PhD thesis, 2014). As Losinger puts it, lower-level university administrators often remain 'after-thoughts' or 'non-thoughts' (2015).

Two provisional conclusions were drawn in light of the points made so far, which influenced the direction of this study. The first was that in order to supplement the little HE-based scholarship available on the "forgotten workforce", it would be useful to consider (feminist) academic analyses of the gendering and devaluation of work *similar* to lower-level generalist university administration, but carried out outside of the "ivory tower". Key theoretical concepts in the study of occupational sex typing and selected empirical studies on women and men in female-dominated occupations (secretarial work, caring work and customer service work) were thus reviewed, and a summary is provided in Chapter 3.

The second provisional conclusion was that, in order to investigate persistent barriers to change, the present study had to adopt a different theoretical and methodological approach from those so far taken by studies on gender and lower-level university administration. Specifically, an approach was needed which would enable this study to examine the dynamic interplay of the recurrent themes flagged up in previous scholarship, and critically explore *how* 'universities [have] be[en] allowed to continue in such a way' (Castleman & Allen, 1995: 69); an approach which would go beyond describing lower level-university administration as work that only women do, to explore *how* it is *constructed* as "women's work" to justify the status-

quo; which would go beyond the 'cover of equality' (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998: 803) and the 'rhetoric of collegiality' in HE (Eveline, 2004: 137) to deconstruct how HEA workers may discursively legitimise the current gender imbalance, and talk themselves out of acting to change it. Section 3.4 reviews key findings of studies taking such an approach to the study of gender inequalities in apparently gender-egalitarian workplaces. Further discussion of the theoretical and methodological approach adopted by this study is provided in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3. Literature Review (2): Women and Men Doing “Women’s Work”

Jobs are ‘structured with the particular gender of the laborer in mind’ (Williams 1993b: 4). Put differently, occupations are ‘shaped by the skills and characteristics that men and women are assumed to encompass due to their sex’, i.e. by ‘stereotyped gender traits’ (McDowell, 2015: 274). Women’s work in particular

can be regarded as the outcome of [...] three dynamically interrelating labour market processes [i.e. essentialisation, feminisation and sexualisation] through which those “skills” which are associated with and attributed to women’s perceived nature, gender and sexuality (respectively) are commodified (Tyler and Taylor, 1998: 165)

In their study of flight attendants, for example (cf. 3.3), Tyler & Taylor show that these predominantly female workers carry out work deemed by managers, customers and co-workers to involve skills ‘which women are seen to possess simply by virtue of being women’ (Ibid: 167). These are not framed as skills, but rather as personal attributes, “‘common-sense’ ways of being a woman’ (2001: 71), such as being caring, thoughtful and helpful.

Occupational sex typing, segregation, and women and men in “non-traditional” occupations have been the focus of sociology of work, organisational, and gender and language scholarship for several years, and therefore this literature review cannot be all-encompassing. The next sections consider a selection of crucial theoretical concepts in the study of occupational sex typing and key empirical studies focusing exclusively on clerical/secretarial work (3.1), care work (3.2), and customer service work and communication skills (3.3). They explore what it is that supposedly makes these “women’s work” and skills or, put differently, how they are discursively and culturally made sense of as feminised. Also reviewed here (cf. 3.4) are discursive studies which focus on the way women and men, recruiters and workers account for occupational sex typing and/or the gender imbalance in a supposedly gender-egalitarian workplace/world. The chapter conclusion introduces why this discursive approach, further discussed in Chapter 4, was adopted to investigate the gender imbalance in HEA.

3.1. Women and men in clerical/secretarial work

Clerical and secretarial work, a male preserve until the mid-19th century, became a ‘female job ghetto’ (Lowe 1987: 59) in the 20th century. Truss and colleagues argue

that, despite some improvements, secretarial work is still characterised by 'low status and poor pay, narrow and feminized job content and poor promotion prospects' (2013: 349). A detailed history of the feminisation of clerical and secretarial work is beyond the scope of this section, but is well documented (cf. Lowe, 1987; Silverstone, 1976; Tong: 2014). Scholars note that women's entrance into the world of paid labour due to financial necessity and World War II, preceded by automation, deskilling and rationalisation of clerical work in the 19th and early 20th century, resulted in women taking up the most "routine" and deskilled tasks. Typing pools were established, segregated from the rest of the office and comparable to factory assembly lines, where women operated typewriters, their performance incessantly measured by a female supervisor (Lowe, 1987). These were dead-end roles with no career advancement prospects, and women were thus particularly suitable as they were required by law to resign upon marriage¹⁴. Men were instead able to progress to the newly-established role of manager. Women were also deemed suitable to these jobs due to their 'delicacy of touch, [their being] more patient than men during long confinement to one place, and [their taking] more kindly to sedentary employment' (Silverstone, 1976: 101, citing *Englishwoman Review*, 1871).

More recent studies on clerical and secretarial work have explored its feminisation in an attempt to account for it still being the top occupational category for women in "Western" societies such as the UK. Pringle's (1989; 1993) study of secretaries remains to date one of the most in-depth investigations of the role of discourse (cf. 4.1.2) in such gendering process. The author explores popular representations of secretaries, including the 'office wife', a 'deferential', 'ladylike', 'devoted' 'spinterish figure with the bun' (Pringle, 1993: 133), and the (usually blonde and incompetent) 'dolly bird', 'cheeky and loud', with 'large breasts, long legs and short skirts' (Ibid.), or, in short, heterosexually attractive. These two cultural stereotypes 'play down the importance of what she does [...] in favor of a discussion of what she is' (1993: 132). As a result, a competing discourse of professionalism, promoting an image of the secretary as a (female or male) skilled member of the management team, has struggled to emerge since the 1970s (Ibid).

Issues of power and sexuality interplay in the "normative" male boss/female secretary relationship. Pringle (1993) argues that these are affected when the sex binary is inverted. Secretaries are required to be deferential and subservient, theirs is considered as support and ancillary work which only exists as an extension of that

¹⁴ The marriage bar was gradually lifted in the UK from 1944 onwards. In the UK public service sector, it was not legally lifted until 1973.

of their boss. Men who do this type of work are deemed to be “effeminate”, and their heterosexuality is often questioned due to their willingness to be submissive and helpful (Pringle, 1993).

Language also plays a key role in defining what counts as secretarial work. Job titles, and the way work is talked about, do matter: the ‘pathological avoidance’ (Henson and Rogers 2001: 230) of the title secretary to denote work done by men ends up further feminising it: only work done by women is defined as secretarial, also in official employment statistics. Called by any other name, male secretaries’ work is still a stepping stone for career progression to management. The male secretaries interviewed by Pringle (1989; 1993) admit that they are often exempt from what allegedly are particularly “feminine”, “routine” tasks such as typing and taking phone calls; when they do carry out these tasks, they “hype them up” to distance themselves from “feminine” secretarial work (also cf. Henson and Rogers, 2001).

In light of her analysis, Pringle concludes that

the question that needs to be raised is not, why there are so few male secretaries; but rather, why the title “secretary” is reserved almost exclusively for women [...] not how to get more men into secretarial work but the terms on which they come in (Ibid: 131-2)

With other scholars (e.g Reskin, 1988; Williams, 1993b), Pringle does not see occupational integration as a panacea, at least not until “women’s work” and skills have been revalued. Occupational integration is a matter of power and value more than of numerical gender balance. Achieving the latter without the former comes with the ‘risk of reproducing the sexist devaluation of everything female/feminine’ (Williams, 1993b: 5): it implies that the entry of more men into female-dominated occupations would revalue women’s work. Williams argues that

without addressing the underlying problem—our cultural overvaluation of men and devaluation of women—gender inequality will persist despite the entry of men and women into gender-atypical occupations. There is no question that men can do the work usually assigned to women. The basic problem, and the challenge for those interested in gender equality, is to get men to want to do this work alongside women, without fear or derision (Ibid: 7)

In their study of male clerical temp workers, Henson and Rogers (2001) examine how their interviewees cope with feelings of inadequacy, guilt, shame, and embarrassment. These are triggered by their double failure to embody ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) as a result of doing women’s work. Firstly, not having a “real job”, i.e. a permanent, higher-grade, better-paid occupation

with career advancement opportunities, means these men cannot fulfil the heteronormative role of “breadwinner”. Secondly, secretarial/clerical workers carry out substantial emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and relational work (Fletcher, 1999), which requires them to be deferential, subservient and nurturing toward managers, co-workers and clients alike (Henson & Rogers 2001). As Pringle (1993) also noted, these requirements lead to male clerical workers’ heterosexuality being questioned by colleagues and managers.

Henson and Rogers argue that their male participants deploy three main strategies to negotiate this double failure. These include ‘renaming and reframing the work’, for example by stressing the technical aspects of their role over typical secretarial tasks; ‘distancing themselves from the work with a cover story’, reiterating the temporary nature of their involvement in clerical work, while actively searching for a “proper job”; ‘resisting demands for deference’, e.g. not ‘smiling, waiting, taking orders [or] tolerating the bad moods of their supervisors’ (Henson & Rogers, 2001: 233), a risky strategy which may result in dismissal. By deploying these strategies to re-affirm their threatened sense of masculinity, male clerical workers do not disrupt or challenge the “gender order” (cf. 4.1.3), and end up reinforcing the association of this type of work with women (Henson & Rogers, 2001).

What “feminises” clerical and secretarial work, Truss and colleagues (2013) summarise, are its requirements for deference, subservience, willingness to carry out office/house-keeping tasks such as tidying, filing and welcoming visitors, and the capacity to perform aforementioned emotional labour and relational work. Secretaries are still required to act as gatekeepers and carry out a wide range of personal errands for their bosses. This is a ‘nurturing and caring’ element which is neither officially part of job descriptions nor a pre-requisite for career advancement (Ibid). As Fletcher (1999) argued, the skills required to carry out such invisible, devalued, feminised relational work get ‘disappeared’, i.e. they are not considered or financially rewarded as skills.

Several scholars (e.g. Bolton, 2004; Korczynski, 2005, though cf. Payne, 2009) have argued for a redefinition of emotional labour as skilled. Guy and Newman (2004) are not the first to point out that emotional labour provides the link between virtually all feminised and female-dominated occupations, such as secretarial, (health)care (cf. 3.2) and customer service work (cf. 3.3). With others, they argue that emotional labour is constructed as ‘emotive work thought natural for women, such as caring, negotiating, empathizing, smoothing troubled relationships, and working behind the scenes to enable cooperation’ (2004: 289), and at the same time it is devalued and unrewarded. Hochschild defined emotional labour as the ‘labour without a name – the

unrecognised, unacknowledged “support” function which many women perform both within and outside of the labour market’ (Tyler and Taylor, 1998: 166). The skills required to perform such work are sex-typed, i.e. socially constructed as skills women *naturally* possess as ‘derivative of [their] perceived difference from men’ (Ibid.).

The next section turns to care work and in particular healthcare semi-professions such as nursing: the prototypical female-dominated and feminised occupation based on (the construction of) women as the “naturally” caring, nurturing and emotional sex.

3.2. Women and men in care work

Scholars have argued that, in “Western” societies such as the UK, assumptions about women’s allegedly natural (or acquired) propensity to be caring, empathetic, patient and nurturing are carried over into the world of work (e.g. Cameron, 2007). As a result, ‘women in many professions find that they are cast in the role of carers (e.g. teachers, politics, women in health or education)’ (Ibid: 132). The prototypical example of the historical division of labour by sex and of women’s association with care work is offered by the “normative” female nurse/male doctor dyad (e.g. Pringle, 1996). In the late 19th century, distinctions between the medical profession and nursing were created along gender lines, and tasks and professional training were separated by gender in order to avoid ‘creating scientific women’ (Ibid: 160). Pringle claims that these gendered distinctions became class distinctions once only women had gradually started entering the medical profession in the late 20th century.

Because (paid and unpaid) care work is mostly done by women, ‘how well a society rewards care work impacts gender inequality’ (England, 2005: 381). In her review of previous scholarship on care work, England identifies five main (at times competing) frameworks conceptualising care work, three of which in particular account for its low pay:

The “devaluation” perspective argues that care work is badly rewarded because care is associated with women, and often women of color [... and with the quintessentially gendered role of mothering]. The “public good” framework points out that care work provides benefits far beyond those to the direct recipient and suggests that the low pay of care work is a special case of the failure of markets to reward public goods. The “prisoner of love” framework argues that the intrinsic caring motives of care workers allow employers to more easily get away with paying care workers less (England, 2005: 381; 395).

The low pay of care work is in turn regularly listed as one of the reasons why few men do it. To investigate other reasons, scholars’ attention has turned to men

doing care work: e.g. nursing (e.g. Fisher, 2009, McDonald 2013; McDowell, 2015; Simpson, 2004 & 2005), and, to a lesser extent, elder care (e.g. Applegate & Kaye, 1993; Russell, 2007). This scholarship focuses on how men make sense of their doing “women’s work” and deal with threats to their masculinity and (hetero)sexuality. In his review of previous empirical studies on men in female sex-typed occupations, McDonald (2013) identifies four main strategies that men use, according to these studies, to negotiate their masculinity:

(a) distancing themselves from their female colleagues; (b) attempting to embody traditional masculine values; (c) discursively reconstructing and relabelling the occupation; and (d) renegotiating and redefining masculinity (2013: 563)

From his interviews with both male and female student nurses, McDonald concludes that regardless of their sex, when respondents describe being a “good nurse” they “do” and “undo” gender by taking up or resisting dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity. The author provides examples of how male future nurses emphasise their own performance of nursing work as involving compassion, empathy, nurture and care, thus rejecting not only the feminisation of nursing but also the four strategies outlined above. He concludes that “doing” and “undoing” gender can only be explored by considering male *and* female workers¹⁵, and that doing so has the potential to disrupt the feminisation of nursing.

McDowell (2015) also comes to a similar conclusion. She focuses on linguistic behaviour and provides examples of how male nurses actively use what she defines as a normatively “feminine” discourse style. In her discussion, she offers two interpretations of such linguistic behaviour: on the one hand, ‘doing being a nurse may itself be a performance of a gendered identity’; on the other hand, instead of doing “femininity”, this linguistic behaviour may well be “doing nursing” (2015: 287). She appears to favour the latter, and argues for the need to find better (i.e. non-gendered) terminology to discuss such linguistic behaviour in order to de-gender ‘being a nurse’ and consequently nursing as an occupation. However, as Pringle (1993), Reskin (1988) and Williams (1993b; cf. 3.1) pointed out over twenty years previously, occupational integration (and even comparable worth) will not be a panacea unless the devaluation of women and women’s work is challenged.

Studies have shown that men’s situation in women’s work such as nursing cannot be simply described as disadvantageous. Williams argues that, simply by

¹⁵ The present study shares McDonald’s approach: both female and male administrators / managers were recruited.

virtue of being male, men doing women's work benefit from the effects of a 'glass escalator'. This is a metaphor for the 'structural advantages [...] which tend to enhance [men's] career' (1992: 253); 'invisible pressures to move up' (Ibid.: 256). Williams's research participants account for the vertical stratification within their occupation by suggesting that men are pushed up the career ladder into managerial roles more quickly, and struggle to 'stay in place' (Ibid.). They also observe how male nurses tend to be channelled into better-paid, more prestigious specialisms, such as mental health, which are made sense of as more "gender-appropriate". Williams concludes that, although men face the negative effects of gender stereotyping upon entering feminised occupations,

to the extent that these stereotypes contribute to the "glass escalator effect" by channelling men into more "legitimate" (and higher paying) occupations, they are not discriminatory (Williams, 1992: 264).

Studying Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) in the UK, Litosseliti and Leadbeater (2013a; 2013b) provide supporting evidence. Their research respondents draw on the interplay of common-sense gendered discourses (cf. 4.1.2) to account for men's disadvantage when it comes to entering SLT: a 'women as carers/nurturers discourse' (2013a: 304), a 'women as superior communicators discourse' (Ibid: 307; cf. 3.3 for further discussion) and an overarching 'gender differences discourses' (Ibid: 304, cf. 4.1.3). Their participants also produce 'discourses of gender and career progression' (Ibid: 308) to make sense of the "male advantage" they observe when it comes to promotion within SLT.

Recently, Williams's glass escalator concept has been critiqued for not taking into account intersectional (dis)advantage, and in particular the experiences of ethnic minority men. For example, Wingfield (2009) notes how it is usually white men in middle-class female-dominated occupations who benefit from the glass escalator effect. Because of systemic racism, ethnic minority men do not benefit from preferential treatment from either their (white male) bosses or (white female) colleagues. To Williams's credit, she originally stated that

the crucial factor is the social status of the token's group – not their numerical rarity – that determines whether the token encounters a "glass ceiling" or a "glass escalator" (1992: 263).

This suggests, albeit implicitly, that ethnic minority and working class men's social status would result in a "glass ceiling" rather than "escalator".

Williams (2013) recently revisited her own notion of glass escalator, and concluding that 'new concepts' are needed to address its limitations. On the one hand, these new concepts should consider intersectional experiences, and in particular theorise race, sexuality and class; on the other, they should also take into account characteristics of the 21st century neoliberal job market: the relative scarcity of 'stable employment, career ladders, and widespread support for public institutions' (2013: 609). Williams's study of the low-wage, precarious retail work shows that in this particular type of customer service work 'there are no glass ceilings or glass escalators' (Ibid: 622). Often referred to as "customer care" and treated as a caring occupation in its own right (e.g. England, 2005), customer service is the female-dominated occupation examined in the next section.

3.3. Women and men in customer service work

The label "service work" encompasses various occupations, ranging from retail/sales assistance to cleaning, from call centre work to beauty, body and, some argue, sex work (e.g. Sanders, 2005). With many others, Kerfoot & Korczynski (2005) and Nixon (2009) provide an account of the growth of the "service economy" in the UK since the late 1970s. Writing in 2009, Nixon notes how of the six million service jobs generated in the UK in the previous 30 years, two-thirds were taken by women. Kerfoot & Korczynski (2005) also point out that women predominate in front-line service jobs, characterised by low wages, job insecurity and limited career prospects. They describe service work as the second "female ghetto" after clerical and secretarial work. Scholars have investigated the feminisation of various types of service work, including paid body work (e.g. Wolkowitz et al. 2013; Cohen and Wolkowitz, 2017) and the "pay penalty" of occupations involving 'interactive service work' (e.g. England, 1992; England et al. 2002).

This section focuses on selected empirical studies considering what is commonly referred to as customer service work. This is an increasingly important component of administrative and secretarial occupations in the marketised university (e.g. Pitman, 2010; cf. Appendix C for further discussion). Kerfoot & Korczynski (2005), Nixon (2009), and Tyler & Taylor (1998; 2001; Taylor & Tyler, 2000) argue that what "feminises" customer service work are its requirements for emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), deference, empathy, patience, and an 'ethic of care' (Tyler & Taylor 2001, citing Gilligan 1982). Having observed and interviewed airline industry telephone sales agents and flight attendants at work, Tyler & Taylor define them as the 'personification of the commodification of sexual difference, of women's perceived

difference from men' (1998: 166). A key point they make is that women's alleged propensity to an ethic of care is not natural as much as it is *naturalised*, i.e. assumed to be a consequence of, and therefore juxtaposed to, their sex.

The authors show that, as natural(ised) carers, women are described by both customers and managers responsible for recruitment as essentially and effortlessly better at this sort of work. Sexual difference is therefore invoked by managers to account not only for their hiring women 'sometimes because they are women rather than anything they've particularly shown in the interview' (manager interviewed by Tyler & Taylor, 2001: 69), but also for their differential evaluation of workers' performance. As natural(ised) carers, women's emotional labour and caring work are not deemed as skilled in the evaluation or consumption of this work; rather, they are seen as 'common-sense ways of being a woman' (Ibid: 71).

It is precisely the requirement for emotional labour which, Nixon argues, puts white British working-class men off working in female-dominated customer service jobs. His participants state that they would rather remain unemployed than have to 'put a smiley face on' (2009: 300), manage their own as well as their customers' feelings, and patiently and passively put up with customers' sometimes aggressive behaviour. Working-class men's horizontal segregation into sub-sections of service work which do not require much customer interaction can be thus understood in the context of the feminisation of emotional labour. Nixon's work is a reminder of how the feminisation of emotional labour is based on a specific version of femininity, or 'common-sense ways of being a woman' (Tyler & Taylor 2001: 71). This is clearly racialised (white), (middle-)classed, (hetero)sexualised and ableist, and so dominant in "Western" societies and cultures that it has come to represent femininity as a whole.

Scholars have pointed out that possessing highly-developed communication skills is another requirement of customer service work which feminises it in line with these situated, 'common-sense ways of being a woman' (Ibid). In her study of computer programmers working for companies based in Northern England at the end of the 1980s, Fitzsimons (2002) observes within-occupation horizontal and vertical segregation. Women mostly occupy lower-level, less "technical" roles, e.g. that of helpdesk analyst, offering telephone computer support to customers and users. Fitzsimons interprets women's segregation in this role in terms of managers' assumptions of women's 'innate capabilities, interests and aspirations', such as communication skills, and the ability to keep calm and carry out monotonous tasks. She argues that these gendered assumptions result in women being clustered in roles covered by 'the three Cs: caring, clerical and cleaning' (Ibid: 88, paraphrasing Rubery

et al, 1992). Due to the importance of communication skills in the service economy, a fourth “C”, for communicating, should be added to this list.

Building on Tyler & Taylor’s research, feminist linguist Cameron investigates the widely-held assumption, in “Western” societies, that communication skills come naturally to women (2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2007) by focusing on the language of the service encounter in in-bound call centres. She shows that although women are supposedly *naturally* good at customer care/service work, managerial training and supervisory initiatives involve ‘styling the worker’ (Cameron, 2000b: 323), i.e. making sure that employees do not deviate from the gendered script they are hired to perform. This includes prescriptive linguistic and vocal styling aimed at mimicking stereotypical assumptions of “women’s language” and “feminine” communication styles – “expressive language, a language of feeling and a language of caring” (Ibid: 339) – resulting in ‘the commodification of a quasi-feminine service persona’ (Ibid: 324).

Cameron points out that male service workers are subject to the same ‘corporate verbal hygiene practices’ (Ibid: 341) as their female colleagues, but that performing such “feminine” linguistic persona in interaction with customers has different implications for them. She is, however, cautious in defining men’s position in service work as straightforwardly disadvantaged, or, conversely, women’s numerical dominance as a sign of “advantage”:

the advantage [women] currently enjoy over men in terms of numbers employed in the service sector may arise in part from discrimination in their favour, but it also reflects the continuing disdain of many men for service work (Cameron, 2000b: 342).

Women’s “advantage” in these low-status, low-paid, dead-end roles is not unrelated to many men’s dismissive attitude towards service work: work which ‘has elements of both nurturance and low status or powerlessness’ (Cameron, 2003: 459).

Scholars have demonstrated that generally speaking it is men, not women, who benefit from displaying and making use of “feminised” communication skills and emotional competence. In her study of ICT (Information Communication Technology) workers in Switzerland, Kelan (2008; 2009a&b) sets out to investigate whether the increasing importance of emotional competence and communication skills in ICT as a service-oriented occupation has resulted in the “feminisation” of ICT work and the ideal ICT worker. Kelan’s research participants initially construct an apparently “gender-neutral” ideal ICT worker, capable of balancing technical skills and social competence, e.g. the ability to listen and understand clients’ needs. People and communication skills are often framed as providing added value, whereas technical

abilities as a taken-for-granted requirement of ICT work.

When asked whether they think their workplace is “masculine”, Kelan’s respondents tend to express regret about the low numbers of women in ICT, and point out that women improve the work atmosphere because they are ‘social beings’ and ‘more socially competent’ (2009a: 61). The apparent contradiction between describing the ideal ICT worker as gender-neutral and simultaneously locating the very skills which make it “ideal” in women is not acknowledged as such by Kelan’s respondents. Nevertheless, this contradiction creates a space into which male ICT workers can slot themselves, claiming “ideal worker” status. It is male ICT workers, Kelan shows, who benefit from performing what are deemed to be naturally feminine qualities such as caring and communicating: this takes them closer to the gender-neutral ideal worker. Female ICT workers are instead simply seen as doing what women “naturally” do by virtue of being female. Their display of technical skills does not work to their advantage either, as these are the taken-for-granted, basic requirement of ICT work.

Kelan’s study takes a discursive approach to the analysis of ICT workers’ patterned ways of accounting for the lack of women in their profession. This approach allows her to explore the paradoxical tendency among her participants to reassert the gender neutrality and egalitarianism of their workplace in spite of persistent gender imbalance and inequality. Other studies taking such approach are reviewed in the next section.

3.4. Accounting for gender inequality in the “gender-egalitarian” workplace

In their study of the Dutch banking sector, Benschop & Doorewaard state that

both the persistency of gender inequality and the perception of equality emerge from a so-called gender subtext: the set of often concealed, power-based gendering processes, i.e. organisational and individual arrangements (objectives, measures, habits) systematically (re)producing gender distinctions [... which yet] emerge as abstract and neutral (1998: 787-8)

This set of concealed gender processes, which ensure the persistence of gender inequality, are so entrenched that they are paradoxically made sense of as gender-neutral. This makes it possible to claim that workplaces are egalitarian. The typical example of such gender subtext is the concept of the disembodied worker, critiqued by Acker (1990), whose characteristics, including full-time availability, uninterrupted commitment to work and geographical mobility, are presented and understood as the

gender-neutral organisational norm. These requirements are in fact embodied by male workers much more often than female workers. Similarly, the provision of “equal opportunities” is made sense as the provision of the *same* opportunities to all, regardless of circumstances (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). The unequal outcomes this leads to are then re-interpreted as the result of individual merit (also cf. Bagilhole & Goode, 2001).

Benschop & Doorewaard provide other examples of how such gender subtext, or gendering, is done in organisations, and of how workers discursively deal with ‘the gender inequality that cannot be’ (Ibid: 792). For instance, their respondents recurrently mention their organisation’s ‘show pieces’, i.e. the token women at the top, as living proof that gender equality has been achieved. They appear not to make sense of the ‘mommy track’ (i.e. the parallel yet divergent career path into which mothers, especially those working part-time, are channelled into) as a manifestation of gender inequality. Rather, they construct it as the logical consequence of women’s life and career “choices” (cf. below), a regretful yet inevitable loss of talent. The authors conclude that

to break through the self-evidence of the gendering processes, the cover of equality should be recognised as part of the emperor’s new clothes [...] taking attention away from systematic gender inequalities (1998: 803).

Discourse analysts are particularly well-equipped to break through this ‘cover’ or rhetoric of equality, as they are able to deconstruct how this rhetoric is organised (also cf. 4.1.2). In their study of undergraduate students’ ‘attitudes towards careers’, Wetherell and colleagues (1987) identify two main patterned accounts, ‘practical ideologies’ (Ibid: 60), ‘interpretative repertoires’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) or, in other words, discourses (cf. 4.1.2). These are an ‘equal opportunities’ discourse, whereby ‘everybody should be treated as an equal’ (Ibid: 62), and a competing ‘practical considerations’ discourse, whereby the ‘biological inevitability’ of the ‘reproductive role of women’ is presented as ‘the problem’ (Ibid: 63). Drawing on these two discourses in various ways allows Wetherell and colleagues’ participants to account for the persistent gender inequality at work in a common-sense, matter-of-fact way, and at the same time present themselves as liberals endorsing egalitarianism. The authors argue that these apparently competing patterned accounts are ‘ways of making sense’ which work to the same ideological effect: legitimising the status quo and ‘effectively neutralis[ing] impetus for change’ (Ibid: 64-5).

In her discourse analytical study of broadcasters' accounts for the lack of women DJs at British radio stations, Gill (1993) explores how inequalities are made sense of and articulated. Her respondents provide various types of patterned accounts, punctuated with apparent contradictions. For example, they claim that 'women do not apply', because they 'are not interested' and/or are put off by the male-dominated environment; that women regrettably lack the right skills and experience, measured against "objective" recruitment criteria, because they are naturally – or brought up to be – different from men; that the audience do not like their 'shrill' voices, and/or like their 'dusky' voices too much (Gill, 1993).

The author makes several fundamental points: first of all, that all her respondents had this 'whole range of ways of accounting, which they drew on selectively in the interviews' (1993: 89); that the apparent contradictions in such accounts eventually achieve the same effect (i.e. justifying the status quo) in various, flexible ways; that these accounts are not made sense of as sexist or discriminatory. On the contrary, prejudice and sexism are openly disavowed. These accounts therefore 'quite literally d[o] discrimination in new ways' (Gill, 2014: 518): subtle, flexible, and palatable ways that, being more difficult to pinpoint and therefore to challenge, are thus equally if not more insidious.

In her aforementioned study of ICT workers' ways of accounting for the lack of women in their profession, Kelan also explores the paradox, or ideological dilemma (Billig, 1991), 'that gender is simultaneously said to matter and not to matter' (2009a: 146). Although her research participants do not appear to orient to this as a contradiction, Kelan shows how they nevertheless make considerable discursive effort to navigate such paradox. This produces 'gender fatigue' (Kelan, 2009b), which eventually leads participants to reassert the irrelevance of gender at work. For example, the discriminatory episodes respondents tell are regularly reframed as past, one-off individual and isolated incidents, which could not happen again today.

Similarly to Gill's (2002; 2014) new media and cultural workers, Kelan's ICT workers construct their workplace as egalitarian, gender-neutral and meritocratic, in spite of the paucity of women in their profession. In this egalitarian workplace, gender discrimination and inequality are openly disavowed. In light of their discourse analyses, the authors argue that far from no longer existing, structural inequalities have rather become 'unspeakable' (Gill, 2014), and workers lack the language to account for their persistence (Kelan, 2009a&b).

The patterned accounts these scholars critique in their research are historically and culturally-situated elements of a 'postfeminist sensibility', the 'common-sense of postfeminism' (Gill et al, 2017: 230; Lewis et al, 2017). This they

define as a 'discursive formation' typical of the neoliberal workplace as well as of contemporary society and culture at large (e.g. Gill, 2007a). Having incorporated some depoliticised features of feminism, postfeminism disavows it as no longer needed (Gill, 2007a; 2014; Kelan, 2009a&b). It is based on the common-sense, widespread idea that 'gender has had its moment' (Kelan: 2009b: 199), and that 'all the battles have been won' (Gill, 2014: 509).

The 'pasting' of inequalities (Tasker and Negra, 2007, cited in Gill et al, 2017: 227) is, however, only one feature of this flexible postfeminist sensibility at work. Gill and colleagues (2017) critique other patterned accounts their research respondents produce which work to repudiate the existence of gender inequality and diminish or completely erase the rationale for collective, structural action (Ibid; Lewis et al. 2017). Participants, male and female, tend to locate gender inequality elsewhere, especially in other countries; they paradoxically construct being female as an advantage in the gender-egalitarian workplace, and/or account for persistent inequalities as 'just how it is' (Ibid).

As scholars have noted, the language of postfeminism is a language of individualism and "choice" (e.g. Gill et al, 2017; Lewis et al, 2017) As gender equality has allegedly already been achieved and workplaces are gender-neutral, it is up to the *individual female* worker to be empowered and self-confident, 'lean in' (Sandberg, 2013, for a critique, cf. Adamson, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2015; Gill et al. 2017) and make the right *choices* for a successful career (Sørensen, 2017). Among others, Gill and colleagues note how features of this postfeminist sensibility interplay with neoliberal ideas of individualism, entrepreneurialism and self-regulation, and point out that it is women who are interpellated by such calls to work on themselves to be successful (Gill et al, 2017; Gill & Scharff, 2011).

Sørensen's (2017) work on media representations of 'career mothers' in Norway is also a reminder that women are called to make "choices" in relation to motherhood and "work-life balance". These "choices" are in fact restrained and in turn provide limiting subject positions (cf. 4.1.2 for further discussion) for women, or, rather, specific types of women. The 'part-time working, good mother' and 'the exceptional career mother' in particular are subject positions only available to middle/upper-class working women, who are able to 'purchase' gender equality in the form of childcare and housekeeping, i.e. of other women's work. Representations of the 'failing (career) mother', on the other hand, show how individual women are blamed for their own shortcomings and 'wrong choices' (Ibid.), once again 'pointing away from structural understanding [and] collective solutions' (Gill et al: 2017: 231).

Discourse analysts have critiqued the consistent construction of motherhood as ‘the problem’ (Wetherell et al, 1987: 63), ‘the issue’ (Gill, 2014: 510), the standard, taken-for-granted and common-sensical way to account for women’s under-representation in specific professions and especially at the top of such professions. As the existence of gender inequality is denied, women allegedly only have themselves to blame for lagging behind in the gender-egalitarian, meritocratic workplace. Gill argues that, rather than being paradoxical, such ‘myth of egalitarianism and meritocracy’ at work is thus ‘part of the very mechanism through which inequality is, in fact, reproduced’ (2014: 523)

3.5. Conclusion

The second phase of this study’s literature review considered key theoretical concepts and selected empirical studies on occupational sex typing, and women and men in female-dominated occupations in particular. It aimed to supplement the first literature review phase on HEA and gender, and therefore focused on areas of work and skills similar to those characterising HE administrative and secretarial roles. The aim of this second phase was to appraise scholarship examining how female-dominated occupations (secretarial/clerical work, caring work and customer service/communication skills) are also feminised, i.e. socially and culturally sex-typed, and how this in turn sustains occupational sex segregation. This chapter flagged up the importance of exploring how female and male workers and recruiters/managers make sense of work and skills as gendered. This is a point the present study took further in its analysis of local discourses co-constructed in focus groups and interviews with CSU staff. In particular, whether/how administrators and managers talk about (i.e. discursively construct) university admin work as “women’s work” was one of the main foci of this study’s data collection and analysis.

The scholarship reviewed here also highlights that what these areas of female-dominated work have in common is not just the requirement to carry out emotional labour, although this is certainly a fundamental thread (e.g. Guy and Newman, 2004). If women’s allegedly natural propensity – or rather, their discursive and social construction – as the caring, nurturing, emotional, patient, emphatic, organised and talkative/communicative sex is what feminises occupations requiring such skills, it does not, however, account for their location on the lower echelons of the labour market in terms of pay and prestige. What does is the devaluation of work and skills that are “feminised” (e.g. Reskin, 1988; Pringle, 1993; Williams 1993).

The devaluation of “women’s work” was a recurrent theme in both phases of literature review. Eveline (2004) provided perhaps the most insightful account of “ivory basement work” as feminised and devalued. However, this devaluation and feminisation appear to be somehow taken for granted, rather than examined as processes, as something that is done (also) through language. Similarly, commentators have lamented the intersection of sexism and intellectual elitism typical of academia (e.g. Atkinson, 2001, cf. Chapter 2) but how this intersection plays out and is articulated through language has not been explored.

In order to address these points, the methodological and analytical approach adopted by the present study (cf. Chapters 4 & 5) was modelled onto that taken by the discourse analytical studies reviewed in 3.4. In keeping with those discourse analytical studies, this study did not aim to find out the “actual” reasons behind the gender imbalance in HEA, but to

explore the sense-making processes people use and how these processes act in concert to “justify injustice” and to perpetrate gender inequality (Kelan, 2009a: 57; cf. 4.1).

Taking a discursive approach enabled this study to move beyond simply describing “ivory basement work” as devalued work mostly done by women, and explore how its “feminising” and devalu^{ing} are articulated in and through language to the point of becoming common sense. By examining them as discursive processes or constructions, this study aimed to deconstruct their ‘taken-for-grantedness’, and show how it can be discursively contested.

Analysing participants’ patterned ways to account for the gender imbalance in HEA afforded this study an opportunity to critically explore discursive barriers to change which have ‘allowed universities to continue in such a way’ (Castleman & Allen, 1995: 69). In line with previous discourse analytical studies, the present study aimed to explore how (HEA) workers discursively navigate an apparent contradiction, i.e. the paradoxical ‘degree of segregation that remains in the [HE] sector in the face of gender equity initiatives’ (Strachan et al, 2013: 217). It purported to do so by deconstructing HE’s ‘rhetoric of collegiality’ (Eveline, 2004: 137) and egalitarianism, analysing how this rhetoric is organised, and critiquing how it works as an interplaying network of discursive barriers to change and gender equality.

Chapter 4. Theory, Methodology & Methods

This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical and methodological framework adopted in this study (cf. 4.1), and discusses the data collection methods used to investigate the overarching research question and its sub-questions (cf. 4.2).

4.1. Theoretical and methodological framework

This study took a critical realist discursive approach to investigate a social issue – the horizontal and vertical gender imbalance in UK HEA. This approach entailed analysing discursive constructions and patterned accounts co-produced by staff at a UK case study university to discuss the aforementioned issue. Critical attention was especially given to how participants make sense of work as gendered, and talk about acting – or not – to change the gender-imbalanced status quo. The ultimate aim of the study was to promote discursive change through deconstruction and critique of discursive barriers, and research recommendations. The next sub-sections further spell out this study's theoretical and methodological approach.

4.1.1. Critical realism, feminism and reflexivity

Broadly speaking and with some provisos (cf. below), this project adopted a social constructionist perspective on language (e.g. Burr, 2003), i.e. a view that 'language *does things*' (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999: 2), is *constitutive* as well as representational. Put differently, language and language use/discourse (cf. 4.1.2) do not simply reflect or describe a reality "out there". Rather, they (at least partly) contribute to the construction/production of situated, i.e. locally, historically and culturally contingent, versions, which are made to appear factual through their rhetorical organisation (Potter, 1996).

Social constructionism is often accompanied by 'epistemic relativism' (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999b: 208), which denies the possibility of knowing any reality outside of its discursively produced versions. Some scholars note that this epistemic relativism prevents them from articulating political or emancipatory aims, because these presuppose the existence of some kind of reality which research aims to know and change. Gill argues that

precisely those features of [social constructionist] discourse analysis that make it so productive for feminists – its problematizing of truth claims, its stress on the socially constructed nature of all knowledge, its rejection of the idea of the unified, coherent subject, and its attention to power as a local practice – also make it problematic. [...] The notion that subject positions are fragmented and multiple can lead to the denial of any identity

around which we can collectively mobilize; the emphasis on the micro-politics of power – how it is practised in particular discursive contexts – can serve to make structural inequalities invisible and lead to a neglect of the institutional base of power; and the discourse analytic commitment to relativism [...] means that the grounds for feminist politics are disavowed (Gill, 1995: 167).

Gill calls for a 'politically informed relativism [...] in which we, as feminists, can make social transformation an explicit concern of our work' (Ibid: 178; 182).

Searching for such an approach, this study adopted critical realism as a politicised, 'non-relativist variety' of social constructionism (Willig, 1999: 39). Critical realism appears to reconcile the (apparently) competing concerns with the constitutive role of language, the structural constraints within which it operates, and emancipatory aims of social transformation (also cf. 4.1.2). Differently from relativism, critical realism (or 'social realism': Cameron et al, 1992; 2014) theorises and interprets social and discursive constructions within the constraints of 'higher-level social structures' (Ibid: 131):

while social constructions are relative, they are not arbitrary, but emerge through social processes that are already shaped by influences such as power relationships and material resources [...]; we simply cannot construct the world in any old way we choose (Cromby and Nightingale, 1999: 4; 9).

Although language is seen as constitutive, from a critical realist perspective what is constructed is not necessarily any the less real for individuals, and has material consequences on 'real women and men' (Cameron 2003: 448; cf. 4.1.3. for a discussion of 'gender'). The aim of critical realist discursive research is thus to provide

detailed and comprehensive descriptions of the discourses available to groups and individuals, and of the various ways in which these discourses are deployed and with what consequences (Willig, 1999: 39).

Critical realist discursive research also aims to move beyond deconstruction and explanation of social and discursive practice in order to promote social transformation through discursive change. As Willig puts it, research must 'have something to say about how things can be improved [...] and] be committed to interventionist work (Ibid: 48-9). Fairclough makes a similar point:

The objective of discourse analysis [...] is] analysis of the relations between discourse and non-discoursal elements of the social, in order to reach a better understanding of these complex relations (including how changes in discourse can cause changes in other elements) (2005: 924).

Critical realist discursive analyses thus also take the extra-discursive into account, in order to ‘understand continuity as well as variability’ and contribute to ‘its progressive transformation’ (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999: 7; 10). Progressive is a key word. Critical realist research with political, often emancipatory, aims is inevitably partial and situated: ‘to argue for something is to care, to be positioned’ (Ibid: 7, citing Edwards et al, 1995). How discursive change is theorised in critical realist discursive research is further discussed in Chapter 12, where research recommendations are provided.

A critical realist approach is thus also in line with the explicit ‘political commitment to social justice’ (Bucholtz, 2014: 23) of feminism. In feminist scholarship, the researcher’s situated socio-political stance is not considered as an issue, as long as it is critically reflected upon. Besides, all researchers

cannot help being socially located persons. We inevitably bring our biographies and our subjectivities to every stage of the research process, and this influences the questions we ask and the ways in which we try and find answers (Cameron et al, 1992: 5)

Nevertheless, researchers ought to be reflexive: they should constantly consider the ways in which their biographies, subjectivities and social identities affect the data they collect and their interpretations of them (Reay, 1996). A reflexive approach to research has been advocated by feminist scholars to navigate the long-standing issue of ‘speaking for others’ (e.g. Alcoff, 1991): ‘others’ who might be in (m)any way(s) less privileged than the researcher themselves, but also ‘others’ the researcher might feel close to.

Feminist researchers’ insightful reflections (e.g. Alcoff, 1991, Finlay, 2002; Reay, 1996; Ryan Flood & Gill, 2010; Watts, 1996; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996) helped me – a former university administrator studying university administrators – navigate the so-called ‘dangers of proximity’ (Reay, 1996, citing Du Bois, 1983) through all research stages. On the one hand, the knowledge acquired through my previous experience as a lower-level university administrator was an asset, for example with regards to the design of the questioning routes (cf. 4.2.3 & 4.2.4). Not only did I share a “common language” with my research participants, but I was also familiar with ways of “doing things” in UK university administration. On the other hand, I soon realised that I could not consider myself as an “insider”, or claim to be speaking on behalf of my participants, just because I shared one aspect of multi-faceted and continuously shifting identities:

researcher and researched may have different ideas about who “we” are – and the researcher’s claim to be included in the “we” of the research subjects may be rejected by them (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996: 24)

At various points in the research encounters, participants oriented to me as “other”: as someone “studying” them and their answers, as a student, as a (supposedly) prospective academic. One participant for example, commented on how I had moved to “the dark side”: although it was unclear which side they meant (student or academic), I was evidently not “on their side”. Some male participants were obviously speaking to me as a woman, using disclaimers, or words such as ‘unfortunately’, when talking about the gender imbalance; others, male and female, oriented to me as a feminist, someone with an agenda, and their answers were clearly aimed at supporting or dismantling such agenda. My choice of topic and implied definition of the gender imbalance as an issue to discuss (and change) meant that participants’ talk should be interpreted as situated responses occasioned by my questions, rather than the transparent representation of “their voices” or interests.

As the ‘joint product of the participants, the researcher, and their relationship’ (Finlay, 2002: 531) data, rather than “collected”, were thus co-constructed or co-produced during discursive events. Silences were equally co-constituted and meaningful. This study’s silences about (the intersection of gender with) race, disability, and to a lesser extent, sexuality, class, age and other sites of potential (dis)advantage were co-produced by several (f)actors. These included the lack of data on intersectional imbalances in UK HEA and at CSU, my decision to focus primarily on gender, and, during focus groups and interviews as discursive events, my participants’ as well as my own failure to talk or ask about intersectional or other types of disadvantage (cf. 12.3.3).

Power relationships were constantly shifting during focus groups and interviews, especially, but not exclusively, when interviewing (senior) managers. My relatively privileged position in relation to my research participants should nonetheless be acknowledged. This position of power was, arguably, partly related to my being a *former* lower-level administrator now doing a PhD, allegedly studying to become an academic (cf. Chapter 2 for a discussion of the hierarchy-based ‘them and us’ divide in HE). It was also related to the researcher’s role as analyst and interpreter of their participants’ words. This entails (especially – but not exclusively – in critical discursive studies) managing what Kitzinger and Wilkinson call the ‘dilemma of conflicting commitments’:

both to enable the voices of Others to be heard, and to create social and political change for and on behalf of those Others [...] as the Others to whom researchers are committed to “giving voice” very often do not share the researcher’s commitment to social change (Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1996: 20-21).

Discourse analysis (cf. 4.1.2) focuses not just on what participants say, but also on how they say it, i.e. what linguistic/discursive choices they make, their functions and effects. This means that the content of participants’ responses is not simply taken at face value, but analysed in terms of what it “does”, i.e. its implications, and critiqued when it ends up sustaining the status quo (also cf. 4.1.2). Being acquainted with several of my research participants, I not only had to manage ‘dual relationships’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 87); I also became particularly sensitive to the potential paradox, even hypocrisy, of conducting a project aiming to address the lack of research on, with and for lower-level university administrators only to impose my own interpretation on their words.

As several feminist researchers before me have realised, however, there are ‘other ways of treating what respondents say seriously’ than ‘always taking what they say at face value’ (Reay, 1996: 68, citing Bhavnani, 1993). This is at the basis of Gill’s notion of ‘critical respect’:

Respectful listening is the beginning, not the end, of the process and our job is surely to contextualize these stories, to situate them, to look at their patterns and variability, to examine their silences and exclusions, and, above all, to locate them in a wider context. This does not involve ‘elevating’ the feminist scholar above other women [or participants; ...] to situate an individual’s account is not to disrespect it. [...] It is perhaps akin to the role of a member of a solidarity movement – that is, offering support, but recognizing that the support is worth more when the person giving it has not given up their right to engage critically, to ask questions, rather than be rendered a mute supporter (Gill, 2007b: 77-8).

Social transformation cannot be promoted by acting as ‘a mute supporter’: rather, it requires the researcher to critique collective discursive patterns working as discursive barriers to such social transformation.

The next two sub-sections provide definitions of discourse, (gendered) discourses, discourse analysis and gender in light of this study’s critical realist, feminist perspective and its social transformation aims.

4.1.2. Discourse(s), gendered discourses and discourse analysis

Discourse is a highly contested term: its definitions are influenced by discipline-related, theoretical and epistemological perspectives (Mills, 1997). The most common,

basic definitions of discourse are:

- 1) *Language “above the sentence”*
- 2) *Language “in use”*
- 3) *A form of social practice in which language plays a central role*
(Cameron and Panović, 2014: 3)

The third definition resonates with the social constructionist view that language use is ‘something that people do that is socially meaningful’ (Kelan, 2009a: 53, emphasis added), and that contributes, at least partly, to constructing situated versions of events/reality. Candlin defines discourse as

a process which is socially situated [...] a means of talking and writing about and acting upon worlds, a means which both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices within these worlds, and in so doing both reproduces and constructs afresh particular social-discursive practices, constrained or encouraged by more macro movements in the overarching social formation (1997, cited in Jaworski and Coupland, 2014b: 2)

Discourse can also be used as a countable noun, as sets of

possible statements about a given area [...] organis[ing] and giv[ing] structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about (Kress, 1985, quoted in Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002: 10).

Put differently, individuals and groups ‘fashion [their voices] out of the social voices already available’ (Lemke, quoted in Cameron and Panović, 2014: 8). These historically and locally contingent ‘social voices’, or ‘discourses’, simultaneously enable and constrain individuals’ meaning making.

Broadly speaking, the task of the discourse analyst is to treat ‘discourse data [...] as *discourse* as well as just data’ (Cameron, 2001: 66), i.e. as a topic in its own right (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Language use is analysed with an emphasis on its constitutive role:

the language user is viewed as selecting from the range of linguistic resources available to them and using these resources to construct a version of events, although not necessarily in an intentional way [...] Discourse analysis focuses on this public and collective reality as constructed through language use. It examines how people use language to construct versions of their worlds and what is gained from these constructions [...] Key tasks that discourse analysts within this action-oriented approach set themselves are to identify what functions are being performed by the linguistic material that is being analysed and to consider

how these functions are performed and what resources are available to perform these functions (Coyle 2007: 100-101)

The focus in discourse analysis (henceforth DA) is thus both on how discourse is constructed, i.e. rhetorically organised, and on its 'action orientation', i.e. on how its organisation constructs accounts which have specific functions and effects: the 'subtle ways in which language [...] makes things happen' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 1). The way(s) in which people rhetorically structure their talk and construct their version(s) of the world do not only have specific consequences on the immediate interactional context (i.e. how they are heard and reacted to e.g. by other speakers). They also have implications on the wider social context (i.e. what is 'gained' through a particular construction of events and who benefits from or is disadvantaged by it).

Context is thus key in DA. As discourse is occasioned (i.e. produced for a particular occasion), situated language use which can be deployed flexibly to achieve a range of functions, it is only in and through context that the function(s) of a particular stretch of talk can be understood (Kelan, 2009a; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 2000). Therefore, in addition to patterns of similarity or consistency, DA is also interested in variations from identified patterns, 'not only between persons, but within persons' (Wood & Kroger, 2000: 10). This is because 'a person's account will vary according to its function' (Potter & Wetherell 1987: 33).

Discourse analysts pay particular attention to variation, contradictions and absences (i.e. 'what is not there' (Wood & Kroger, 2000: 91), but could have been) also in that they are 'essential to the understanding of the operation of ideology and its maintenance' (Wetherell et al, 1987: 69). Ideology is intended as a 'discursive practice' (Wetherell and Potter, 1992: 61), i.e. as an *effect* of language use, and as often sustained by the rhetorical strength of "common-sense", taken-for-granted discourses. Discourse is not inherently ideological, but 'becomes ideological through its use, construction and form of mobilisation', i.e. when it has the effect of 'establishing, sustaining and reinforcing oppressive power relations' (Ibid: 171; 70).

Throughout this thesis, the term *ideological* is deployed, in line with Wetherell & Potter's definition above, to critique the *effects* of a given account or discourse which end up legitimising/supporting the gender-imbalanced/unequal status quo, therefore closing down opportunities for actions and thus progressive change. Using the term *ideological* to critique the effects of a given account or discourse does not imply intentionality on the part of the speaker(s) (cf. above, Coyle, 2007: 100). The analysis of discourse as a social practice involves a critique of language *use* and its

effects, rather than of the individuals using it: the ‘unit of analysis’ are discursive patterns, not the ‘individual actor’ (Wetherell et al., 1987: 70).

Instead of ‘discourse(s)’, social psychologists talk of ‘practical ideologies’:

the often contradictory and fragmentary complexes of notions, norms and models which guide conduct and allow for its justification and rationalization (Wetherell et al 1987: 60)

and/or of ‘interpretative repertoires’:

recognisable routine[s] of arguments, descriptions, and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterisations of actors and situations (Edley and Wetherell, 2001: 443)

available choreograph[ies] of interpretative moves [...] from which particular ones can be selected in a way that fits most effectively the context [... Interpretative repertoires] construct real-seeming versions. The very obviousness of such versions makes them seem literal and not versions at all [...] they provide a reassuring and solid common sense to discourse; their use does not have to be further accounted for (Potter & Wetherell, 1992: 92; 95).

Compared to afore-cited formulations of ‘discourse(s)’, these definitions highlight the common-sense, taken-for-granted character of discourses/interpretative repertoires as well as their (seemingly) contradictory nature/usage. As every-day, common-sense ‘ways of seeing the world’ (Sunderland, 2004: 6), discourses can be drawn upon flexibly – often contradictorily – to discursively maintain unequal power relations in society, i.e. to ideological *effects*.

The role of discourse analysts, especially those aiming for social transformation, is thus to adopt a ‘critical stance towards the taken-for-granted’ (Coyle, 2007: 99); question their own as well as their participants’ assumptions; and ultimately challenge the rhetorical effectiveness of common-sense accounts by exposing how they are *made* to appear factual, i.e. organised and constructed as ‘the truth’ (Ibid; Potter, 1996).

In the more critical strands of DA research, discourse analysts are particularly interested in exposing and critiquing the ‘social and political significance’ (Sunderland, 2004: 4) of discourses and their relationships. Discourses can be used in mutually supportive or competing ways, to maintain or challenge unequal power relations in society. The discursive tension between competing discourses, of which contradictions can be traces, might potentially open up opportunities to challenge dominant assumptions and related social practices (including gendered ones):

contradictions, together with gaps, incompletions [and silences...] may signal discursal instability and hence act as pointers to struggle and avenues of social change (Ibid: 12).

Discursive change is theorised as a form of ‘collective, social and individual agency, struggle and resistance’ (Sunderland & Litosseliti 2002: 14, drawing on Fairclough, 1992; also cf. 12.2):

through our language and other social practices, we can and do rework and often contest the assumptions embedded in [dominant] discourses. [...] As we participate in resistant discourses, we become part of a process of changing perceptions of experience, forming new perceptions, reconstructing our own and others’ identities, and developing new social practices (Ibid: 14; 18).

From this perspective, the ultimate aims of critical discursive research are to investigate social inequalities as they are articulated and legitimised in and through discourse, and foreground those versions or accounts which have *emancipatory* potential but are censored or silenced due to their differential access to ‘discourse networks’ (Jaworski and Coupland, 2014a).

The term *emancipatory* is used throughout this thesis to refer to the *effects* of a given discourse/account which have the potential to contest/subvert the gender-unequal status quo and thus open up opportunities for action and change. *Emancipatory* is, therefore, defined in opposition with *ideological*, intended as an effect of discursive practice (cf. p.62, Wetherell & Potter, 1992: 61)¹⁶. It is acknowledged here that this use of the term is situated, and signals my own positioned, critical stance. Adopting a critical realist perspective, a politicised, ‘non-relativist variety’ of social constructionism (Willig, 1999: 39), is what allows this study to explicitly articulate political (c)aims (cf. 4.1.1), and ‘make social transformation an explicit concern’ (Gill, 1995: 182).

A critical realist DA aiming to explore and critique discursive barriers to gender equality at work, of which this study is an example, has, as its unit of analysis,

patterns of accounting or sense making [... as] one crucial facet of the reproduction of a labour market stratified by gender [... and] the collectively shared practical ideologies which reconcile women and men to their employment options (Wetherell et al, 1987: 69-70).

¹⁶ This is not in line with common usage, whereby defining something as emancipatory can be considered as an ideological act in itself, i.e. as serving a specific agenda.

In other words, the critical focus is on patterns of accounting as well as on *gendered* 'practical ideologies' or discourses which end up legitimising the gender-imbalanced/unequal status-quo.

Sunderland (2004) defines discourses as 'gendered' (and/or 'gendering') when they 'subject position', or construct, individuals in particular gendered ways (e.g. as a "working mother" on the "mummy track" rather than as a "career woman" – where there is no parallel "daddy track" for the "working father" vs. the "career man", McConnell-Ginet, 2011: 267). As with 'general' discourses (Sunderland, 2004), individuals are both positioned by gendered discourses and take up, negotiate, or resist gendered subject positions constituted by available discourses. Gendered discourses can also be dominant or subversive, and intertwine in competing or mutually supporting ways (Litosseliti, 2006a, Sunderland, 2004).

Among the gendered discourses identified to date, Sunderland (2004) discusses an overarching 'gender differences' discourse, whereby differences between the "genders" (or, rather, the sexes) are often constructed as "natural" or essential. The gender differences discourse and its permutations permeate the way in which most people make sense of reality, and constitute

an unthreatening and common-sense way to explain and deal with gender inequalities they observe around them on a daily basis (Stubbe et al, 2000: 232).

Far from being just "different", men and women end up being positioned hierarchically within a binary opposition: as, respectively, superior and inferior, and as, contradictorily, incompatible *and* complimentary. Discourse analysts have thus directed their efforts to exposing how gender differences

are not so much a description of how women and men speak [or are, but rather] a discourse that has material consequences (Weatherall, 2002: 78).

A critical realist analysis of (gendered) discourses therefore aims to explore the discursive and material consequences or effects of producing such (gendered) discursive constructions, especially when they ultimately work to maintain the (gender unequal) status quo. It is also interested in the potentially emancipatory effects of contesting these damaging discourses and constructions.

The discursive approach taken to analyse this study's data sets is discussed in detail in Section 5.2. The next sub-section instead turns to how gender can be theorised in critical realist discursive research.

4.1.3. Gender

Gender is also a highly contested term, and this sub-section cannot rehearse all its theoretical definitions. Cameron provides a useful summary of the 'social constructionist turn' (2005: 322) in language and gender research, whereby gender came to be theorised as a "doing" rather than a "being" – an ongoing "performance" or process in which language use plays a fundamental constitutive role. At the basis of this social constructionist turn was Butler's famous formulation of gender as performative, as a

repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a "natural" kind of being (Butler, 1990: 32-33).

Equally fundamental was the ethnomethodological theorisation of gender as 'a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 125).

Performances of gender ought to be recognised in order to be meaningful. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet put it, 'we cannot accomplish gender on our own [...] gender is a practice connecting the individual to the social order' (2013: 20). Our performances of gender are constrained by and judged against what Butler calls a 'rigid regulatory frame' (cf. above), i.e. the binary set of culturally-specific traits associated with either normative femininity or normative masculinity:

regulatory norms make certain performances of gender a "natural" kind of being while others are rendered inappropriate or unintelligible and [...] subject to social and physical sanctions and penalties (Ehrlich and Meyerhoff, 2014: 7).

This 'rigid regulatory frame' has also been referred to as the 'gender order' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013: 32). Connell identifies a tripartite classification to the gender order: 'the allocation of power and prestige'; 'the division of labour', and the 'regulation of cathexis', which covers 'the whole range of likes and dislikes, including but not confined to erotic desire and gender-based derogation of others' (McConnell-Ginet, 2011a: 265, drawing on Connell, 1987). Intended as the 'gender order', gender thus also works as a 'structural principle', organising social institutions such as

workplaces, schools, courts, political assemblies and the state and the patterns they display in "the recruitment, allocation, treatment, and mobility of men as opposed to women" [...] Gender differences are created, for instance, in the division of labor into paid and unpaid work, in the sexual segregation of workplaces and the creation of "men's" and "women's" work, in differences in wages, and in discrimination in job

training and promotion [...] Gender should be understood (also) as a principle for allocating access to resources, and a defence for systematic inequalities (McElhinny 2003: 32, citing Gal, 1991)

Theorising gender as a 'structural principle' need not be incompatible with a social constructionist view of gender (and sex, cf. Bem 1993; Nicholson 1994). On the other hand, the former is more suitable to the purposes of the current study. This study was not interested in exploring how gender is performed in interaction or via language use, i.e. how participants discursively construct gendered (occupational) identities. Rather, the main research aim was to explore how gender works as a structural principle organising the allocation of work in university administration, and how it is invoked to discursively maintain barriers to changing a gender-unequal division (and value) of labour.

A concern with gender as a structural principle is shared by several scholars, e.g. sociologists such as Acker (1990), Reskin (1988) and Williams (1993a; cf. Chapter 3), and gender and language theorists and researchers. The latter have urged not to lose sight of 'gender dualisms' continuing power and pervasiveness' (Cameron, 1998: 954), which operate as 'an overarching system of social organisation' (Cameron, 2006: 3). In her critique of so-called "Mars and Venus" literature, which describes men and women as though they were from different planets, Cameron focuses on Baron-Cohen's (1994) work. Baron-Cohen uses the concept of "male" and "female" brain to explain a

natural division of labour, whereby men [who tend to have "male" brains] design things, explain things, and decide things, while women [who tend to have "female" brains] serve others and take care of their needs (Cameron, 2007: 10-11).

Cameron notes that not only is this classification based on simplistic, common-sense knowledge of what these jobs involve and who do them (mostly men or mostly women), but it also (not coincidentally) postulates "male" jobs as more stimulating and prestigious than "female" jobs.

This stereotypical classification of jobs as "female" or "male" has to do with gender as a 'symbolic system' (Litosseliti 2006b: 53), or, put differently,

the cultural interpretations of given types of work which, in conjunction with cultural norms and interpretations of gender, dictate who is understood as best suited for different sorts of employment (McElhinny, 1995: 221).

Although these cultural norms are geographically and historically specific, because

the gender order is founded on the principle of 'male advantage' (Cameron, 2007; McConnell-Ginet, 2011b, Williams, 1993b) it is not surprising that "male" jobs in any given culture tend to be considered as "better" in some way or another (e.g. better-paid, requiring more authority, intelligence, skill etc.). Attributing these distinctions to the brain naturalises them and works to justify inequalities characterising the job market also in allegedly gender-egalitarian "Western" societies. Constructing gender differences or dualisms as "natural" is a typical feature of the afore-mentioned gender differences discourse (cf. 4.1.2): critiquing this discourse along with its detrimental material consequence is key in feminist critical discursive research with emancipatory aims.

The popularity of the "Mars & Venus" literature suggests that, despite social constructionist theorisations of gender as performed or constantly (re-)constructed, gender dualisms and the gender order still provide a 'rigid regulatory frame' (Butler, 1990: 32) used by people to make sense of the world on a day-to-day basis:

No matter what we say about the inadequacy or invidiousness of essentialized, dichotomous conceptions of gender, and no matter how justifiable such comments may be, in everyday life it really is often the case that gender is "essential". [...] Many people really do find it vital to be able to pigeonhole others into the normative, binary set of female-male [...] Two issues arise from this: the relevance of our research outside the small circle of academics and theoreticians, and the use that people outside our ingroup may make of the research conducted within these frameworks (Holmes & Meyerhoff 2003: 9; 15).

Sex and gender dualisms are still very likely to make sense to most people (including research participants). It is therefore necessary to understand the way these ideologies work and 'inform everyday linguistic and social practice among real women and men' (Cameron, 2003: 448).

In order to facilitate social intelligibility and ultimately enhance the political efficacy of research, Holmes advocates the use of 'strategic essentialism': 'the strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' (2007: 56, citing Spivak). As people tend to make sense of what happens around them via sex and gender dualisms, these can also be utilised, albeit carefully, to critique systemic inequalities. This study took this 'strategically essentialist' approach in its use of categories like "women" and "men", "women's work" and "men's work". These dualisms are a reminder that striking inequalities do exist, all over the world, between "real women and men" (Cameron 2003: 448; also cf. Mills 2002). They also simultaneously offer a widely socially-intelligible terminology to promote this study's political aims of social transformation.

The next section outlines this study's overall methodological approach, including the methods used to produce data and investigate the research questions.

4.2. Data co-production

Section 4.2.1 provides an overview of this study's methodological approach to the research questions. The case-study university is briefly described in 4.2.2. In 4.2.3 and 4.2.4, focus groups and semi-structured interviews are introduced as methods and as they were conducted during the two phases of data co-production.

4.2.1. Methodological approach

Table 1 lists this study's overarching research question (ORQ) and its sub-questions; Figure 1 visualises the overall methodological approach taken to answer the research questions.

ORQ	What gendered discourses, discursive constructions and patterned accounts create barriers to change in HEA's gender-imbalanced staff profile? How do CSU staff talk themselves out of (or into) acting to change HEA's gender imbalance? (cf. Chapter 12 for a summary)
RQ1	How do CSU administrators/managers/leavers talk about entering HEA? How do leavers talk about leaving CSU/HEA? (cf. 6.2; 7.2)
RQ2	How do CSU administrators/managers/leavers talk about progressing in HEA? What (gendered) discourses do they draw upon to talk about (lack of) progression for themselves and others? (cf. Chapter 7)
RQ3	How do CSU administrators/managers/leavers talk about university admin work? What (gendered) discourses do they draw upon to talk about this type of work and the people who do it well or poorly, and to what effects? (cf. Chapters 6, 8 & 9)
RQ4	How do CSU administrators/managers/leavers discursively account for the horizontal and vertical gender imbalance at CSU and in HEA? What (gendered) discourses and patterned accounts do they produce, and to what functions/effects? (cf. Chapters 8, 9 & 10)
RQ5	How do CSU administrators/managers/leavers talk about change to the gender imbalance? What (gendered) discourses do they draw upon and what accounts do they produce in order (not) to argue for change? How do they talk about current initiatives to address the gender imbalance? (cf. Chapters 10 & 11)

Table 1: Research questions

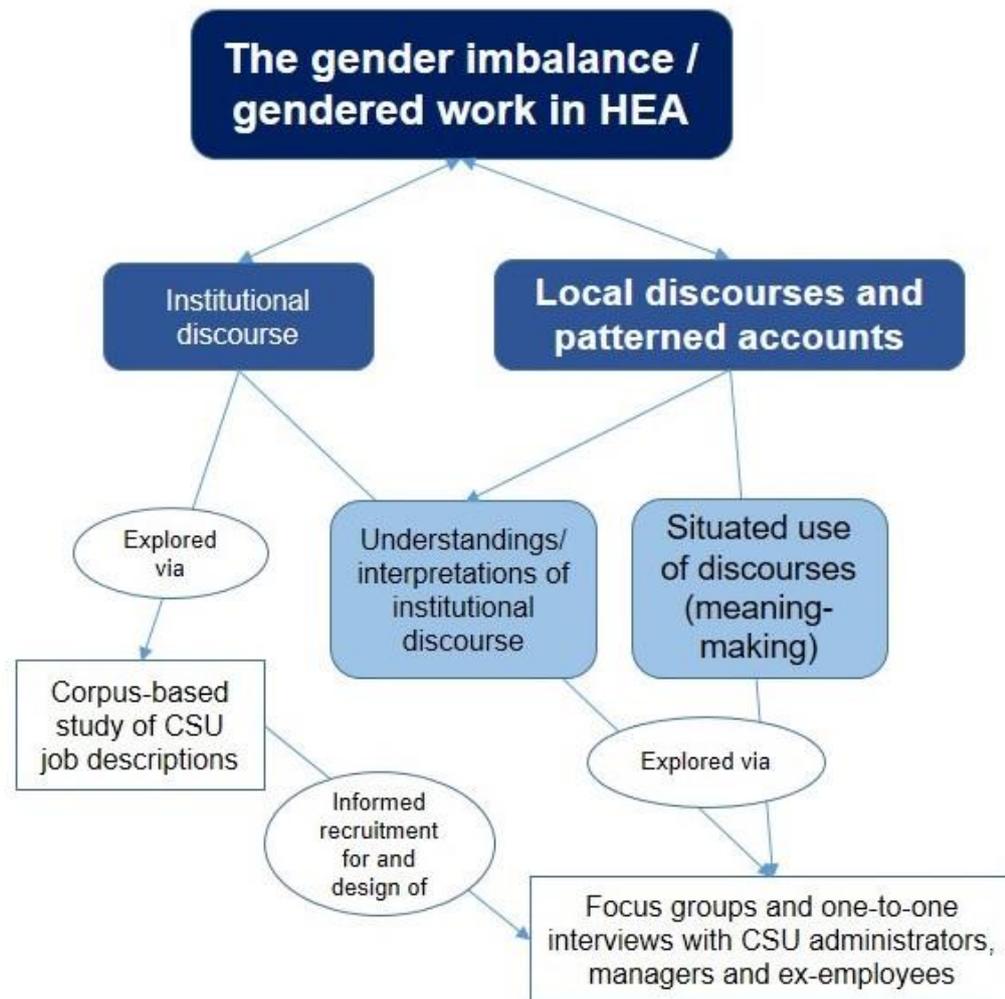


Figure 1. Overall methodological approach

A corpus-based study of CSU job descriptions was conducted in order gain insights into a snapshot of institutional discourse about HEA work in the period leading up to the main data collection phase. This exploratory study also contributed to the identification of additional literature to be reviewed on areas of work and skills described as requirements in this sample of lower-level university “admin” job descriptions (cf. 3.1-3.3). Due to its exploratory nature, the methodology and results of the corpus-based study are discussed in Appendix C (i-iii) and its implications (cf. Appendix C.iv) are referred to in the main thesis text only as and when relevant.

The wider study’s main focus was on the effects of local, situated (gendered) discourses about HEA (and in particular “admin”) work and HEA’s gender-imbalanced staff profile, i.e. on how these are drawn upon to sustain (or challenge) the gender-imbalanced status quo. Local discourses were intended as understandings and interpretations of institutional discourse (e.g. talk generated by a sample job

description¹⁷ and data about the gender imbalance, cf. Appendices D & G), and situated discourses and patterned accounts co-produced to make sense of the horizontal and vertical gender imbalance (cf. Chapters 5 and 8-11). Due to their focus on the interactive co-construction and negotiation of situated meanings, focus groups and interviews were utilised as, respectively, main and supplementary methods of data production to explore local discourses and accounts, and were conducted with (former) staff of the case study university (CSU). This study also aimed to promote discursive change via research recommendations in light of its data analysis (cf. Chapter 12).

The next sub-section provides relevant background information about the UK university selected as a case study.

4.2.2. The case study university (CSU)¹⁸

As this study's main focus was on local, situated discourses, concentrating on one case study university was considered epistemologically useful. Doing so allowed for an in-depth investigation of participants' situated meaning-making and local patterned accounts of gendered work and the gender imbalance, both on the micro level of their own institution and on the macro level of the HEA sector. Furthermore, an examination of related issues, such as (internal) career progression and mobility, was made possible by focusing on one epistemological site.

The university selected as a case study is a pre-1992 institution located across several campuses in one of the most multi-ethnic cities in the UK. It is composed of a numbers of Schools, covering both STEMM and AHSSBL subjects¹⁹, and central university departments providing professional services at institutional level. A research-intensive university, when this project was conducted CSU had a student population of about 20,000, and a staff population of about 2,000, of whom just over half were PS staff (in line with national data).

CSU was selected as the epistemological site for this study for several reasons. First of all, its PS staff gender profile was representative of the national picture (cf. Figure 2 on p. 72, Section 1.1, and Appendix A). CSU also had a significant

¹⁷ This was produced as an output of the corpus-based analysis, by using keywords and concordance lines from the G4 job description sub-corpus (cf. Appendix C.iv for further discussion).

¹⁸ Information which would make CSU identifiable has been amended/removed from this thesis version. This has weakened the reflexive component of this section and the thesis in favour of greater participant anonymity/confidentiality.

¹⁹ STEMM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine; AHSSBL: Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business & Law.

staff gender pay gap. At the time of this study's conception and data production, CSU had recently been unsuccessful at obtaining an Athena SWAN award (ECU, 2017), which recognises sustained commitment to advancing gender equality in UK and Irish HEIs. At the Bronze level of this award, institutions are required to conduct quantitative and qualitative data analysis (including staff consultation), identify issues and plan a set of targeted actions with quantifiable and specific success measures to address these issues (Ibid.). In light of this and due to its representativeness of the sector's gender imbalance, CSU was an interesting epistemological site where to explore the maintenance of discursive barriers to action and change. This study inserted into this rather bleak, yet certainly representative, picture of the HE(A) sector.

Figure 2 provides a snapshot of the vertical gender imbalance in CSU PS staff roles in 2013, an imbalance similar to the national trend (cf. 1.1 & Appendix A; Grade 2 and Grade 3 roughly correspond to XperthHR levels N and M respectively and to spine points 21-33, cf. Appendix B):

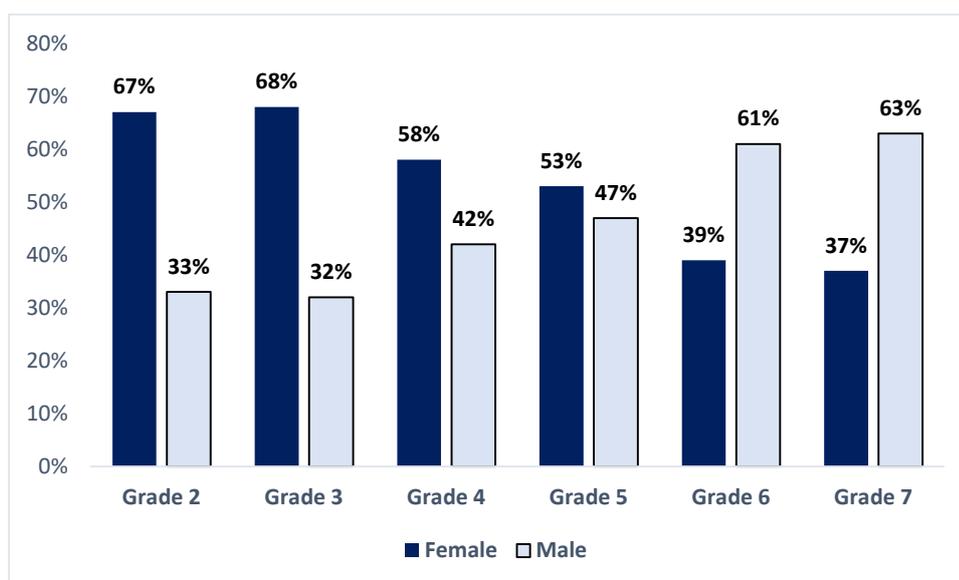


Figure 2: PS staff by gender and grade at CSU, 2013. Numbers of staff on each grade by gender are unavailable. Grades have been re-numbered to further de-identify CSU.

At CSU, lower-level generalist administrators are located on grades 2 and 3 (henceforth G2/G3)²⁰ in academic Schools as well as central university departments. As central departments tend to host a mix of generalist and specialist administrators/professional staff (cf. 1.2 and 2.2 for a definition) – whereas Schools, Faculties and academic departments tend to be staffed mostly by generalist

²⁰ Some are also located on G1; however, as manual/operative staff are also located on this grade, G1 is more gender-balanced than G2/G3. Because of this and due to this study's focus on upward progression from G2/G3, G1 employees were not included in the FG participant target group, cf. 4.2.3.

administrators – the staff profile in central departments tends to be more gender-balanced (Strachan et al. 2013; Tong, 2014). CSU is no exception to this (inter)national trend. At the time of this study's data collection, CSU PS staff were more gender-balanced than in UK universities on average (56% female at CSU vs. 62.7% female nationally), but CSU PS staff based in Schools (on all grades, G2/G7) were between 60% and 71% female. Lower grades (G2/G3) were likely to be more female-dominated than 60-71%, in line with national data for 'administrative and secretarial occupations': 81.4% female nationally (cf. 1.1).

This study was particularly interested not only in the female-dominated, forgotten administrative and secretarial workforce (cf. 1.1 and 2.3; i.e. in the horizontal gender imbalance), but also in (lack of) progression from these roles, and its links with the vertical gender imbalance. It therefore focused on the first key career transition point (henceforth KCTP) for CSU generalist administrators, between G3 and G4, i.e. between "admin" and middle-management. This KCTP is also where the gender trend begins to narrow before reversing on senior grades, both at CSU (cf. Figure 2), and nationally (between level M and L; cf. Table 9, Appendix A). CSU G4 employees tend to have line-management or supervisory responsibilities (with some exceptions), G5 staff usually have team management responsibilities, and G6/G7 are senior management grades.

The next two sub-sections introduce this study's data production methods: focus groups (cf. 4.2.3) and semi-structured interviews (cf. 4.2.4), detailing how they were conducted at CSU.

4.2.3. Focus groups

Focus-group methodology enables the researcher to 'capture [participants'] language and concepts', in relation to a topic they (the researcher) selected, and to analyse 'collective sense-making', i.e. 'the ways the meaning of a topic is negotiated among people' (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 77; 109). Due to the flexibility of the questioning approach, which accommodates the flow of the interaction between participants (Litosseliti, 2003), focus groups (henceforth FGs) are suitable for exploring both the 'what', or the content of participants' views, and the 'how', i.e. 'the web of responses and how these are pursued, grounded, clarified and interlinked through group interaction' (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010: 165). Participants can 'interact with each other to ask questions, challenge, disagree or agree' (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 109). Data are thus collectively generated, i.e. co-constructed or co-produced, via participant (including participant-moderator) interaction.

Among the benefits of this method, scholars have noted how FGs allow the researcher to observe (and partake in) group dynamics and gain (albeit partial and situated) access to participants' day-to-day language use (Litosseliti, 2003; Edley and Litosseliti, 2010). Feminist researchers have used FGs as a method which can contribute to shifting the power from the researcher to the researched, making the research encounter less hierarchical (Wilkinson, 1999). FGs can be a useful method to investigate sensitive topics (Ibid.), and a tool to start looking at an under-researched area or population (Frith, 2000). FG methodology is also particularly suitable for research with a 'social change or activist intent' as 'it can be experienced as empowering', have a

consciousness-raising effect on individuals and lead to some kind of individual (and perhaps ultimately social or political) change (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 111).

Due to this study's interest in local, situated discourses and patterned accounts, FGs were selected as the data co-production method for the main data set. Purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was adopted, i.e. the participant target group was selected on the basis of the research questions (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999). As the main research focus was on the female-dominated administrative and secretarial workforce in HE, and on progression from these roles, the main target group was composed of lower-level, generalist G2/G3 CSU administrators. Differently from previous research (e.g. Castleman & Allen, 1995; Eveline, 2004), this project was interested in engaging both female and male administrators (cf. 1.1).

Kitzinger & Barbour (1999) and Braun & Clarke (2013: 113) list some challenges of using FG methodology, which this study also had to deal with, e.g. logistical difficulties in organising groups (somehow mitigated by conducting them on campus), and the time-consuming transcription process (discussed in 5.1). Other limitations were negotiated from the critical realist, reflexive, discursive analytical perspective adopted in this study. For example, the challenges of keeping the discussion on topic vis-à-vis the "risk" of somehow influencing participants' responses, the difficulties of dealing with dominant or shy participants, and other related effects of group dynamics such as false consensus, group polarisation, or the 'good participant' effect (Litosseliti, 2003) were not necessarily deemed as drawbacks affecting the "reliability" of the "results". Rather, these were issues to be critically and reflexively engaged with during the data production, analysis and interpretation phases, as were the challenges of recruiting from pre-existing workplace teams (cf. below for further discussion of confidentiality). For example, negotiating a pre-existing

'pecking order' (Michell, 1999: 36), or the possibility that participants may be sharing 'well-rehearsed public [i.e. institutional] knowledge' (Ibid.) were in fact of interest to this study.

The FG literature suggests careful planning, the use of pilot groups, and the selection of an appropriate, experienced moderator to manage the above challenges. A detailed questioning route was prepared (of which several drafts were reviewed) and "tested" by conducting two pilot FGs at HE institutions other than CSU, in October 2014. Insights and feedback from the two pilot groups (and subsequent groups) led to substantial revisions to the FG Questioning Route (cf. Table 2 below for a summary), and facilitated key methodological choices. These included, for example, explicitly referring to gender in the participant information sheet (although this may have somehow deterred some potential participants from volunteering, cf. 5.1 and below), and openly mentioning my previous experience as a lower-level generalist university administrator to all participants prior to the start of the research encounter (regardless of our level of acquaintance). These were choices which had repercussions, and were thus approached reflexively, during data production, analysis and interpretation.

Not explicitly gendered Qs	Intro speech	Ground rules; ice-breaker & introductions; talking about their job to insiders	0-30 minutes
	Q1	Talking about their job to others	
	Q2	Entering HEA	
	Q3	Skills to be a good administrator	
	Q4-5	Likes and dislikes about current role	
	Q6	Job description task: interpretations of institutional discourse and talking about progression	
Explicitly gendered Qs	Q7	Visual prompt and follow-up questions as intro to explicitly gendered questions	30-60+ minutes
	Q8	Women's/men's work in HEA; visual prompt and follow-up questions on the horizontal gender imbalance in HEA	
	Q9	Task and follow-up questions on the vertical gender imbalance at CSU, including suggestions for change	
N/A	Closing	Any further comments (on or off the record); closing remarks	END

Table 2: FG questioning route structure

Questions aimed to occasion local discourses about lower-level admin work, gendered work and the gender imbalance at CSU and in HEA. The first half of the questions (Intro-Q6 included) were not explicitly gendered. Administrators were prompted to discuss their role, including skills, likes and dislikes, how they entered HEA, and were given a sample G4 job description (Q6, cf. Appendices D & G). The latter was a way to solicit talk about progression and prompt situated interpretations of institutional discourse. So were Q3, asking participants to talk about the skills needed to be a good administrator and, to a certain extent, Q8 and Q9, during which participants were given and asked to comment on visual prompts²¹ showing data about the horizontal/vertical gender imbalance in HEA and at CSU. The second half of the questioning route (Q7-Q9 included) was composed of explicitly gendered questions, aimed to elicit equally explicit “gender talk”.

The pilot FGs allowed me to gain some experience and refine my moderation techniques, including probing, interviewing and group management skills, prior to the “official” start of the data collection. My relative inexperience was counterbalanced by my background knowledge of UK HEA, which informed all research stages, including the design of the questioning routes and the ways in which I acted as a group moderator. As Kitzinger and Barbour point out,

prior knowledge (or the ability to pick up on, or interpret) the language, terminology, gestures and cultural meanings of the particular groups with whom one is working is crucial (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999: 13).

Edley and Litosseliti’s observe that, due to the interactional nature of focus groups, the moderator ‘becomes one of the participants²², [...] whose contributions are also open to analytical scrutiny’ (2010: 165-6).

Participant recruitment occurred mainly via previously-established contacts at CSU, heavily relying on gatekeepers and snowballing (Patton, 2002). Other recruitment methods included group emails, sent to CSU administration offices (using the ‘bcc’ function), posters, displayed on campus, and in-person recruitment. Crucially, personal relationships were never used to pressurise potential participants to take part: I only ever followed up once when prospective participants had failed to reply after initial contact or asked me to reschedule (this also applied to potential interviewees, cf. 4.2.4).

²¹ All visual prompts used were prepared, printed out, laminated and handed out by the moderator/researcher.

²² This is one of the reasons why, when transcribing the data sets (cf. 5.2) I decided to use (the short form of) my name, rather than a label such as ‘moderator’, or ‘interviewer’.

The main criterion for inclusion in this phase of the data collection was being a current G2/G3 CSU administrator willing to share opinions on the topic 'gender, opportunities and challenges in Higher Education Administration'. Conscious efforts were made to have at least one single-sex and one mixed group (cf. 5.1), and to recruit a heterogeneous group of participants in terms of demographic characteristics, in order to avoid involving only 'the usual suspects' (i.e. middle-class white British participants, Braun & Clarke, 2013: 58). Demographic characteristics were nevertheless not used as variables to analyse and interpret the data (in line with the discourse analytical focus on language use rather than language *users* as the unit of analysis, cf. 4.2.3).

Once a prospective participant had gotten in contact, they were sent further information, and once they had confirmed their interest in taking part, a convenient time-slot for the group was agreed upon. Although recruitment for the first two FGs went smoothly, it subsequently slowed down and some difficulties were encountered to organise groups, mainly to do with late cancellations, schedule clashes, negative or non-response. When given, reasons for not participating included being unwilling to 'do work' during one's lunch break and lack of time/interest. A CSU employee refused to hang a recruitment poster in their office because, they stated, 'in this office we are not administrators'. Despite these challenges, the majority of participants who had been approached or made initial contact with the researcher eventually took part.

The number of groups to be conducted or participants to be recruited was not pre-set, but was based on data saturation (Morse, 1995). Four was considered as the ideal number of participants per group in order for the questioning route to be discussed in some depth within the time constraints of participants' one-hour lunch break. Lunch was offered to thank participants for their time, and participants were also entered into a prize draw. Nine FGs (cf. 5.1) were conducted between November 2014 and May 2015, with most groups taking place between end of January and end of April 2015.

This study received ethical clearance from the University. All prospective participants were sent the participant information sheet, the consent form and a demographic questionnaire, and were asked to read, ask any questions about, fill in, sign and return the consent form and demographic questionnaire prior to their FG. The participant information sheet outlined the aim and format of the research, and stressed the importance of confidentiality. Confidentiality is a particularly thorny issue when, as in this case, FG participants are recruited from pre-existing colleague networks. Although colleagues are used to avoiding "compromising" comments, and banter among co-workers 'can illuminate underlying concerns', pre-existing groups

'have a life beyond the research encounter and interaction in the research setting may have far-reaching consequences' (Barbour, 1999: 124). Consideration of these consequences is part of the researcher's ethic-related responsibilities.

Participants were made aware that the group would be recorded and transcribed, that they would be assigned a pseudonym and referred to as CSU G2/G3 administrators, and that CSU would not be identified in any publications derived from the research. Pseudonyms were chosen by the researcher immediately after the group had taken place, and were/are therefore unknown to participants: this was deemed to add an extra layer of confidentiality²³. Participants were explicitly required not to disclose any identifying information about other participants to any other party. This point was re-iterated on the consent form, which participants had to sign prior to the start of the recording, and during the introductory and closing remarks of each group. Participants were warned that although all efforts to maintain anonymity and confidentiality would be made, there were limits to the degree of confidentiality which could be guaranteed, precisely due to the group nature of the research encounter. They were reminded of their freedom to decide what to say, how to say it, and how much to disclose during the FG discussion.

The potential risks and disadvantages of taking part in research were outlined in the information sheet, as was participants' right to withdraw their participation at any time. Due to the group nature of FG discussions, a definition of withdrawing was provided. This definition made it clear that participants had the right not to answer questions they felt were too personal or sensitive, and/or leave the group at any time. Should they wish to withdraw participation after the group had finished (which luckily did not happen), participants were made aware that comments made before their decision to withdraw would remain part of the research unless they raised concerns with the researcher.

The level of detail provided to participants via the information sheet and consent form was considered sufficient for them to be able to provide informed consent. On the other hand, as various scholars have pointed out (e.g. Weatherall et al., 2002), informed consent is another thorny issue. This is especially the case in open-ended, qualitative studies, where not even the researcher can foresee what data will be co-produced in the research encounter, and/or how these data will be analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In light of this, data were interpreted considering

²³ Right after each focus group, I also drew a map of where participants were seated, and jotted down my initial reflections, including moments of comfort/discomfort, banter/conflict (among participants, including myself).

Gill's formulation of 'critical respect' (cf. 4.1.1) and in line with the aforementioned discourse analytical focus on language use (rather than the language user) as the unit of analysis and therefore critique (cf. 4.1.2).

Many of the points made in this section equally apply to the data co-constructed in interview with CSU managers and ex-employees, further discussed in the next sub-section.

4.2.4. Semi-structured interviews

This study also explored discourses about gendered work, career progression and the gender imbalance in HEA collectively produced in interview with CSU managers and leavers. These were a supplementary target group due to this study's interest in the vertical gender imbalance and in the (gendered) CSU/HEA KCTP between G2/G3 and G4(+). This supplementary target group was thus composed of CSU middle-, team- and senior-managers who had progressed *internally* (i.e. within CSU) from G2/G3. G4-G7 managers also belonged to the target group due to their role in shaping CSU policy and practice: exploring their discursive constructions of barriers and/or enablers to gender equality was therefore key in light of the discursive and social transformation aims of the study.

Ex-employees who had recently left CSU were also asked to participate in individual interviews, on the one hand to explore discourses around leaving, mobility and progression, and on the other as a way to access broader HEA, in addition to CSU-specific, discourses about the research foci. The rationale for interviewing ex-employees lay primarily in the assumption that those no longer working for CSU might not be as bound to or constrained by institutional discourse (as CSU managers were expected to be). Speaking to leavers was considered of interest also in line with the discourse analytical focus on patterns not only of overlap or similarity, but also of variation (cf. 4.1.2 and 5.4). Due to the limited number of leavers interviewed (seven, cf. 5.1) and the discursive nature of this project, no claims of generalizability were made; some conclusions on managers' and leavers' discourse are nonetheless drawn in Chapters 7 and 12.

One-to-one, semi structured interviews (e.g. Galletta, 2013) were considered as suitable methods for the co-construction of this supplementary data set. Individual interviews are more suitable than group discussions to gauge detailed personal narratives (as in the case of managers' career trajectories or ex-employees' decisions to leave CSU) which individuals may not want (or get the opportunity) to share in a group (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Logistical issues would have hindered the organisation of FGs with managers, due to conflicting schedules, and especially with leavers.

Interviews could instead be more easily conducted in individual managers' and leavers' offices at CSU and their current workplaces respectively. Managers, for example, were much more flexible in terms of time than line-managed staff and were often able and willing to meet me at any time during or at the end of their working day.

Interviewing participants individually also bypassed issues of group confidentiality (cf. 4.2.4). Interviewees were made aware that all details that may identify individual career trajectories would be withdrawn, and that the researcher might contact them at a later stage to seek their approval on the descriptors chosen. As this was a supplementary data set, and most of the narratives around personal trajectories were beyond the purposes of the study, this turned out not to be necessary. To add a layer of confidentiality for participants, instead of pseudonyms interviewees were given participant numbers (M1-M13 for managers; L1-L7 for leavers).

Interviewee recruitment also heavily relied on previously-established contacts at CSU, snowballing, and existing colleague networks. I approached managers who had experienced internal career progression, and asked gatekeepers (including FG participants and previously-interviewed managers) for suggestions on any potential participants (managers and leavers). Recruiting managers proved to be less challenging than FG or leaver recruitment, and only a handful of managers who had initially been in contact with me subsequently decided not to take part or did not respond to my return email. Contacting ex-CSU employees proved more complicated. The total number of leavers contacted is unknown as recruitment depended heavily on gatekeepers putting a potential interviewee in touch with me: I was often unable to follow up invitations to participate. Internet searches and professional websites such as LinkedIn were also used to get contact details of former employees and contact them directly.

Different versions of participant information sheet and consent form were prepared and used, as were different versions of questioning routes, depending on the interviewee "type". Table 3 (cf. p.81) provides the standard structure of a typical interview questioning route. Interview questioning routes were produced on the basis of insights from the FG data collection phase, and the final versions were the result of several iterative reviews before and during the interview data collection phase.

Not explicitly gendered questions	Intro speech	Ground rules; ice-breaker & introductions (incl. current role)	0-35 minutes
	Q1	Entering HEA (including expectations before entering HEA and career trajectory up to current role)	
	[Q2	<i>Leaving CSU/HEA – leavers only</i>]	
	Q2	Current vs. previous role(s)	
	Q3-4	Likes and dislikes about current role	
	Q5	Professional identity; good vs. bad administrator/manager/leader (<i>Q. adapted depending on interviewee type</i>)	
	Q6	(Previous and future) Career progression enablers/barriers	
	[Q7	<i>Recruiting/appraising/advising G2/3 employees – line/team/senior managers only</i>]	
	Q8	'Dead man's shoes' – talking about progression in HEA	
Explicitly gendered Qs	Q9	Visual prompt and follow-up questions as intro to explicitly gendered questions	35-60+ minutes
	Q8	Women's/men's work in HEA; visual prompt and follow-up questions on the horizontal gender imbalance in HEA	
	Q11	Task and follow-up questions on the vertical gender imbalance at CSU, including suggestions for change	
	Q12	List of initiatives to date; comments and further suggestions for change	
N/A	Closing	Any further comments (on or off the record); closing remarks	END

Table 3: Typical interview questioning route structure

No pilot interviews were conducted. Rather than the 'dangers of proximity' (cf. 4.1.4), interviews required me to negotiate various and shifting power relations. As a former lower-level university administrator, interviewees (including some leavers) ranged from acquaintances to potential former line/team/senior managers; rapport proved hard to establish on a couple of occasions. Again, all interviewees were made aware (even when they were already) of my past experience as a lower-level, generalist university administrator. Participant demographic information is discussed in the next chapter (cf. 5.1), which also provides an overview of the analysis of the FG and interview data sets and its "results".

Chapter 5. Analysis and Results

After describing the data sets (cf. 5.1) and the data transcription and coding processes (cf. 5.2), this chapter provides an overview of the two data analysis stages, each comprising two steps (thematic analysis, cf. 5.3, and discourse analysis, cf. 5.4), and of the “results” (cf. 5.5).

5.1. Data sets and participants²⁴

This study’s main data set comprises talk from nine mini-focus groups with 36 G2/G3 CSU administrators. The supplementary data set is composed of 13 semi-structured interviews with CSU senior administrators, line-/team and senior managers, and seven semi-structured interviews with CSU ex-employees.

As previously noted, each FG had four participants. Initially, the idea was to conduct between six and eight FGs; nine were eventually conducted until data saturation. 28 FG participants identified as female (78%) and eight as male. The proportion of female FG participants was therefore higher than the percentage of female CSU G2/G3 participants at the time of the data collection (cf. 4.2.2, Figure 2), and higher than the average percentage of female PS staff in CSU academic departments (cf. 4.2.2). This is probably because a higher proportion of FG participants worked in Schools, and women are more likely than men to work on lower grades in an academic rather than professional/central departments (Tong, 2014, confirmed by CSU data). This percentage is nevertheless in line with the national average of female staff in HE administrative and secretarial occupations (81.4%).

At the end of a FG, a participant mentioned that some of his male colleagues were reluctant to take part in this study due to its focus on gender; he himself thought ‘it was going to be something psychological about men’ and was relieved to find out it was not. The difficulty in recruiting male administrators to take part in “gender” research had already been flagged up by Sara, one of the pilot FG1 participants, who had managed to convince only one of her male colleagues (a former equality and diversity practitioner) to come along. In qualitative research, the participant sample does not necessarily need to be precisely representative of the wider population; the

²⁴ In this final thesis version, this section was amended to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, and may read as partial or incomplete as a result. A table summarising participant demographic information was removed, and only relevant, non-identifying information is provided in the text. Appendix D was also amended and the version provided only features FG participants’ pseudonyms.

initial aim to recruit some male administrators and have at least one all-male participant group was achieved.

FG participants belonged to an array of ethnic, nationality (though mostly British/European), and age groups (spanning from 19-24 to 60-64) and had been working at CSU for a period ranging from one month to 18 years. Some of them had been in the same role or on the same grade for a considerable amount of time. Some were in the process of being regraded at the end of (yet another) restructuring process, which coincided with the start of the data collection; others were temporarily acting up on a higher grade, had been demoted or had had to reapply for their own or an equivalent role, again due to restructuring.

FG participants had rather high levels of academic education. Only seven administrators were educated below degree level, perhaps due to the fact that a UG degree had relatively recently become a requirement for G3 posts. Of these seven participants, four were aged above 40, meaning that almost half of the ten administrators older than 40 did not have a degree.

The initial aim was to carry out ten interviews; 20 were eventually conducted, 13 with senior administrators, line/team/senior managers (M1-M13) and seven with leavers (L1-L7). Interviewees belonged to a more limited range of ethnic and nationality groups. All bar three were British nationals; all bar three were white. This means that while 28% of the FG sample were BAME, the proportion of BAME interviewees was only 15%. Considering sector data (ECU, 2016: 144²⁵) BAME staff were over-represented in both research samples, probably due to CSU's location in one of the most multi-ethnic UK cities.

Men were not proportionally represented in the sample compared to the general G4-G7 CSU staff population: only four interviewees out of 20 identified as male (two 'managers' and two leavers). As far as managers are concerned however, a requirement to take part in this study was to have progressed internally; the proportion by gender of those CSU G4+ managers who progressed internally is not known. Strachan and colleagues (2013) found that in Australian HEA men tend to start on higher grades than women, and often enter the sector straight into line-

²⁵ The proportion of BAME PS staff UK HE is 8.4%. BAME staff are 7.8% of level N and 8.8% of level M roles; percentages of BME staff on level L and higher range from 5.5% to 9.2%. The proportion of BME PS staff on levels M and N is comparable to the proportion of white staff on the same levels (between 17 and 21%; ECU: 2016: 144). BME staff are 23.7% of those working in administrative and secretarial occupations; and 26.6% of all BME PS staff are in these occupations (vs. 30.8% of white staff, ECU, 2016: 152). Intersectional data (e.g. the proportion of BME women in these roles or by contract level) are currently unavailable.

management positions: this could be another reason for their being relatively underrepresented in this sample.

The leavers' sample was a convenience sample: only those ex-employees who were available at the time of the data collection and known to the researcher or her gatekeepers were contacted. It is interesting to note that of the seven leavers interviewed, more than half were still working in HEA and on a higher grade than at CSU, suggesting they had left CSU to progress in the sector (cf. Chapter 7). Only one leaver had left HEA and was studying for a postgraduate degree; another had not yet left but was planning to leave CSU and move to a different sector (which they shortly afterwards did).

The label 'manager' was applied to all those interviewees who had progressed internally to CSU G4 or above. These include a senior administrator without line-management responsibilities (on G4), line-managers/supervisors (on G4), team managers (on G5), and senior managers (G6/G7). Having progressed internally, these managers had been at CSU for at least four and a half years, and some for over 20 years, having spent most or all of their HEA careers working at CSU. Team managers (G5) were over-represented, and it was not possible to recruit representatives from one School. Managers' and leavers' levels of education were quite varied, suggesting that having a degree is not necessarily a requirement for internal or external progression once in HEA.

5.2. From data transcription and coding to analysis

Both the FG data set (total recording time: 10 hours and 45 minutes) and the interview data set (total recording time: just over 32 hours) were transcribed verbatim (cf. Table 4, p.85, for the transcription notation used). I carried out this time-consuming process ²⁶ single-handedly: the FG data set was transcribed approximately at the same time as interviews were being conducted (May-September 2015); the interview data set was transcribed right after the end of the data collection (September-October 2015).

²⁶ Estimated at approximately 130-150 hours for the main data set (one hour on average to transcribe 4 to 5 minutes of focus group recording) and 160-190 hours for the supplementary data set (one hour on average to transcribe 10-12 minutes of interview recording), for a total of 290-340 hours, i.e. 8-9 weeks' worth of work. Transcribing FG data proved to be much more challenging than transcribing interview data, mainly because of the number of people talking and inevitably overlapping with each other, diversity of accents and similarity of voices, sound dispersion due to recording taking place in bigger classrooms that could comfortably accommodate participants, and limited availability of suitable rooms that would be reachable for participants coming from disparate parts of the CSU campus during their 60-minute lunch break.

Transcribing one's own data provides the opportunity to further the data familiarisation process; avoid transcription mistakes; protect confidentiality by not sharing data with a transcriber; decide the level of transcription detail required; make conscious choices with regards to the interpretation of participants' (e.g.) tone of voice, humour, sarcasm, pauses and so on; and transcribe other paralinguistic features such as smiles, coughs etc., if considered meaningful to the interaction.

Transcription is often considered part of the analysis process (e.g. Wood & Kroger, 2000). Transcripts are situated representations of the raw data; in other words, they are 'partially cooked data' (Sandelowski, 1994, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013: 162). The transcription carried out was rather detailed, and was later simplified as the analysis turned out not to require such level of detail. For example, the transcription of hesitations, repetitions and false starts was only retained when these were deemed analytically interesting.

Symbol	Key
(H)	Inhalation
(Hx)	Exhalation
@	Laughter
<@ word @>	Laugh quality
[word]	Transcriber's comments
[inaudible]	Inaudible speech
?	Indicates upward intonation (not necessarily a question)
<u>word</u>	Indicates stress placed on a word
[word?]	Indicates transcriber's guess
..	Indicates short pause (<1sec)
...	Indicates long pause (>1sec)
... (n.)	Indicates long pause and (duration of pause in seconds)
[word] [word]	Indicates participants' overlapping speech
-	Indicates a truncated word
--	Indicates a false start
Wo:rd	One colon indicates the extension of the previous sound
=	Indicates the absence of a discernable gap between the end of one speaker's utterance and the beginning of another speaker's utterance

Table 4: Transcription notation key. Adapted from Du Bois et al, 1993: 88-89; Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 188-189; Wetherell, 1998: 409-410.

After completing the transcription process, I re-listened to the recording and re-read the transcripts for quality-check and familiarisation purposes (as suggested by e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Braun & Clarke, 2013). I simultaneously made notes on the right-hand side of the transcripts, saved as Word documents. At this stage, these were mainly notes to myself, 'noticing' interesting points or ways of

talking about topics (Braun & Clarke, 2013). “Critical moments” were also highlighted, i.e. moments in the interaction when two or more participants seemed to disagree, or there was some sort of “discursive trouble” or awkwardness, especially with regards to gender-related talk. The familiarisation process also involved asking questions of the data such as:

- How do participants make sense of the topic discussed?
- Why in this particular way (and not in any other way)?
- Would I feel the same or differently in the same situation?
- What kind of world is revealed through their account?

(Adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2013: 205)

Once this process was completed, the FG data transcripts were uploaded to NVivo (QSR International, 2012), one of the most widely used software packages in qualitative analysis, in order to manage and organise the data by coding them. The afore-mentioned notes made on transcripts were copied and pasted onto Nvivo as reflective memos, each linked to its respective transcript file, in order to be easily retrieved, drawn upon and amended or updated if necessary.

As Braun & Clarke point out, ‘the actual mechanics of coding in pattern-based discourse approaches are less defined’ than for other approaches such as thematic analysis or grounded theory (2013: 218). Discourse analysts tend to rely even more than others on an ‘analytic sensibility’ developed from experience (Ibid: 243). For the novice researcher, faced with a considerable amount of data, this may feel overwhelming; systematic, thorough coding was felt as a necessary first step. A thematic analysis approach to coding (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Barbour, 2008) was therefore *initially* (cf. below) adopted to manage, organise and prepare the data for thematic (cf. 5.3) and discourse (5.4) analyses.

Coding the main data set was a lengthy, bumpy journey, consisting of three main iterative phases. The first coding cycle was partially useful in terms of data management purposes, and certainly facilitated further familiarisation with the data set. It involved reading and re-reading (and often re-listening to) a small chunk of data and applying a label, or code (or as many as applicable) to it, which had the purpose of evoking what was important about that chunk of data in relation to any of the research sub-questions (following Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, it soon became apparent that the codes that were being created were often too broad and vague to evoke the data coded at it. Once a code was created, it also became difficult to resist the temptation of adding more data to it whenever the code was seen as remotely applicable, rather than creating a new code that would fit the data more accurately. Although the coding approach aimed to be complete (i.e. it aimed to code ‘*anything*

and *everything* of interest and relevance to answering [the] research questions, within the entire dataset', Ibid: 206), big chunks of data, e.g. those occasioned by visual prompts, ended up being partially coded or not coded at all.

Having completed this first coding cycle somehow unsatisfactorily, the second coding cycle – possibly overcompensating – was extremely descriptive of, and grounded to, the data. This made it difficult to identify patterns (although it did further the familiarisation process). The challenges this coding cycle presented were mainly linked to the perceived incompatibility of more descriptive, thematic, or “content” coding within the social constructionist/critical realist perspective adopted in this discursive study. This perspective presupposes that content should not necessarily be taken at face value, but critically reflected upon for what it *does* (cf. 5.4). Besides, coding for content is problematic in itself, as meaning often depends on (interactional and wider social) context. Coding a chunk of data thematically inevitably means fixing its meaning, neglecting that such meaning is only “there” because it was co-constructed or occasioned by what was said before or afterwards by another (or the same) participant (including the moderator/interviewer).

Maintaining a social constructionist perspective was challenging throughout the second coding cycle and well into the third. The latter involved checking existing codes for consistency, deleting redundant or duplicate codes, and starting to group the remaining codes into patterns/themes. It required bearing in mind that content and ‘style’ are not necessarily distinct:

Content in some senses is style, and style is a kind of content. The point is that discourse analysts are not interested primarily or only in content in the usual restricted sense. Even in those kinds of analysis in which there is a strong concern with content in the traditional sense, for example, in work on interpretive repertoires, the focus is on the kinds of functions such repertoires perform, on the actions that they enable or constrain (Wood & Kroger, 2000: 109).

Previously-developed codes (especially those related to explicit gender talk) were adjusted accordingly and grouped by the function of the data/talk coded at it. For example, all instances of participants talking about mothers when asked about the over-representation of women in “admin” were coded by content as “women have babies”, and then grouped alongside other patterned ways of “accounting for the gender imbalance” in terms of their function: “naturalising the imbalance”. The two analytical steps (i.e. thematic and discourse analysis), presented separately in 5.2.3 and 5.2.4 for clarity, were thus closely inter-related.

Coding and analysing the interview data set (stage 2) were much smoother processes, which took considerably less time (one month instead of four). This was due to my being slightly more experienced and considerably more familiar with the data sets, research aims and the mechanics of analysis, as well as the supplementary character of the data set (cf. 4.2.4). Coding (and analysis) in this case focused on similarities with and variations from the FG data set, thus taking a “top-down”, selective approach. Some aspects of the data which were beyond the scope of this thesis are not reported upon here, but may be the subject of further research (cf. 12.3.3). Because of this, interview transcripts were not uploaded to NVivo, but were coded by copying and pasting chunks of data to the overarching themes (OTs, cf. 5.3; 5.5) from the FG data set, which corresponded to the main research foci, and subsequently proceeding with the rest of the analysis as with the main data set (cf. 5.3 & 5.4). This also helped bypassing the documented ‘tendency towards grounded theory’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 219) of CAQDAS software packages (a challenge faced in the afore-described second FG data coding cycle).

The next sub-sections report on the two data analysis stages. The main, FG data set was analysed first (stage 1); the supplementary, interview data set was subsequently analysed with a specific focus on similarities with and variations from the main data set (stage 2). Each analysis stage in turn comprised two steps: thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013; step 1, cf. 5.3) and discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; step 2, cf. 5.4) with a specific focus on gendered discourses (Sunderland, 2004). These two steps roughly map onto what Potter and Wetherell define as the ‘two closely related phases’ in discourse analysis:

First, there is the search for pattern in the data. This pattern will be in the form of both variability: differences in either the content or form of accounts, and consistency: the identification of features shared by accounts. Second, there is the concern with function and consequence. The basic theoretical thrust of discourse analysis is the argument that people’s talk fulfils many functions and has varying effects. The second phase of analysis consists of forming hypotheses about these functions and effects and searching for the linguistic evidence (1987: 168).

Separating these two steps in practice made the mechanics of the analysis much clearer and more manageable. Thematic analysis is clearly outlined (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013), and offers an easily accessible set of procedures on how to approach the data, code them, and analyse and interpret patterns in content. This helped me, a novice researcher, develop the “analytic sensibility” required to critically reflect on discursive patterns and their effects (cf. 5.4). Table 5 (cf. p.89) visualises the two-step, two-stage data analysis conducted.

DATA ANALYSIS		FG DATASET Stage 1	INTERVIEW DATASET Stage 2	
Thematic Analysis (step 1: cf. 5.2.3)	1	Transcription	2	Transcription
	3	Familiarisation & 'Noticing'	11	Familiarisation & 'Noticing'
	4	Complete Coding	12	Coding to Research Foci / FG Overarching Themes
	5	"Identifying" Themes	13	"Identifying" Themes (consistency and variation from FG themes)
	6	Producing & reviewing thematic map	14	Adding to / amending thematic map
	7	Naming & defining themes (writing)	15	Amending theme definitions & names
	From TA to DA	8	Suspension of belief: adopting a social constructionist/critical realist perspective on language	16
Discourse Analysis (step 2: cf. 5.2.4 and Table 6)	9	Analysis (writing): how do participants talk about themes? Patterns (consistency & variation) in participants' co-produced accounts (incl. tracing & naming gendered discourses)	17	Analysis (writing): how do participants talk about themes? Consistency with & variation from FG participants' co-produced accounts (incl. tracing & naming gendered discourses)
	10	Interpretation: what are the functions of these patterned accounts (incl. variations)? To what effects do participants draw on these (gendered) discourses/discursive constructions?	18	Interpretation: what are the functions of these patterned accounts (incl. variations)? To what effects do participants draw on these (gendered) discourses/discursive constructions?
	19	Writing up (i.e. re-writing): reviewing and finalising analysis and providing recommendations for discursive change (cf. 'practice' stage)		
	20	Quality checking/warranting: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance (Yardley, 2000)		

Table 5: The two stages of data analysis, each comprising two steps (TA and DA). The 20 sub-steps are numbered sequentially as they were conducted. While analysis & interpretation were conducted in two stages, writing up (re-writing) was carried out concurrently for both spoken data sets

5.3. Thematic analysis (TA – step 1)

As Braun & Clarke (2013) point out, thematic analysis is not a methodology in its own right, but a flexible analytical method that can be deployed, for example, as a starting point to develop critical constructionist analyses. It involves identifying patterns in the data, based on ‘the presumption that ideas which recur *across* a dataset capture something [...] socially meaningful’ (Ibid: 223). ‘Meaningful’ is a key word: in identifying patterns, saliency in relation to the RQs is more important than absolute frequency²⁷.

In stage 1, this analytic step involved looking for patterns of similarity and overlap in the FG data collated at the codes previously developed. Codes were grouped around what Braun & Clarke define as a ‘central organising concept’ (2013: 224), thus developing themes. Themes must have a clear focus, scope and purpose (Ibid.). Sub-themes were also identified, which ‘capture and develop notable *specific* aspects of the central organising concept of one theme’ (Ibid: 231). Themes and their sub-themes were in turn grouped and organised under overarching themes (OTs, cf. 5.5), which ‘capture an idea encapsulated in a number of themes’ (Ibid), and roughly corresponded to the main research topics, or discursive objects (the foci of the RQs, around which the questioning route was structured). A provisional thematic map was developed at the end of stage 1, step 1 of the analysis, after which step 2 commenced (cf. 5.4).

In stage 2, this analytic step focused on patterns of overlap, similarity and variation in the interview data set compared to the FG data. Put differently, the focus here was on how (similarly or differently) managers and leavers talked about the research foci / overarching themes co-constructed in the FG data set. Interview data were thus coded and analysed taking a top-down approach, starting from the research foci. Existing themes and sub-themes were amended to incorporate interview data, and some new themes and especially sub-themes were developed. This step also facilitated a review of the provisional thematic structure, as ‘candidate

²⁷ On the other hand, in this study meaningful patterns were *usually* also frequent in the data. When reporting patterns, this thesis does not report on the number of participants raising a particular point or producing a given account/discursive construction (also because, as Braun & Clarke (2013) point out, those who do not raise the same point or objections to it cannot be assumed to (dis)agree). At times, some form of ‘informal quantification’ (Wood & Kroger, 2000: 419, drawing on Schegloff 1993) is used to suggest the “strength” of a theme, when this is analytically interesting. A pattern may be described, for example, as minor, substantial, or co-constructed in all but ‘x’ number of FGs; participants are said to talk about something occasionally, often, recurrently, regularly, consistently, usually, overwhelmingly or most of the time after a specific prompt, and when they do so rarely or not at all (i.e. exceptions or variations) is usually reflected upon.

themes' from the FG data set were checked against coded data as well as uncoded transcripts (as suggested by Braun & Clarke, 2013) from both data sets. The thematic map was thus integrated, and after the second analytical step (DA), finalised to include some form of representation of (gendered) discourses (cf. 5.5).

As pointed out in Table 5 (cf. p.89), analysis went hand-in-hand with writing; in fact, 'qualitative analysis *is* writing' (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 248) and writing is a fundamental part of the analysis. This was an iterative process: several drafts were produced both of the thematic map and of all the "results" chapters. Analytical writing took the form of a critical investigation and interpretation of data excerpts exemplifying themes, i.e. patterns in content, and discourses, i.e. patterned "ways of talking" about, or discursively constructing, such themes. The next sub-section provides an overview of the latter analysis.

5.4. Discourse analysis (DA – Step 2)

Critical realist discourse analysis, with its focus on explanation and social transformation, was used to interrogate the data and explore, critique and ultimately promote action against, discursive barriers to change in HEA. The aim, with Kelan, was

to explore the sense-making processes people use and how these processes act in concert to 'justify injustice' and to perpetrate gender inequality (2009a: 57),

in order to promote discursive change (cf. Chapter 12).

As Edley, amongst countless others, points out, DA is an 'umbrella term for a wide variety of different analytic principles and practices' (2001: 189). This section therefore aims to provide a brief account of the discursive approach that was taken to analyse this study's data sets. Table 6 (cf. p.92) outlines how this approach was developed, following Coyle (2007), by integrating Potter & Wetherell's (1987) ten stages and Willig's (2001) six stages of analysis; by taking into account the analytical and interpretative strategies outlined by Wood & Kroger (2000); and by focusing specifically on tracing and naming gendered discourses as theorised by Sunderland (2004).

DA Sub-steps (cf. Table 5)	Source:	Definition:	Includes:
Sub-steps 8 & 16: From TA to DA	Potter & Wetherell, 1987	Suspension of belief: adopting a social constructionist / critical realist perspective on language.	Questioning what is normally taken for granted in language use
Sub-steps 9 & 17: Analysis	Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Sunderland, 2004; Willig, 2001	Search for pattern in the data: 'this pattern will be in the form of both variability: differences in either the content or form of accounts, and consistency: the identification of features shared by accounts' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 168).	Searching for consistency and variation in the ways participants talk about themes and sub-themes. Focus on discursive constructions (Willig, 2001) and on tracing and naming (gendered) discourses (Sunderland, 2004)
Sub-steps 10 & 18: Interpretation	Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2001; Wood & Kroger 2000	Concern with function and effect: 'the basic theoretical thrust of discourse analysis is the argument that people's talk fulfils many functions and has varying effects. The second phase of analysis consists of forming hypotheses about these functions and effects and searching for the linguistic evidence' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 168)	Interpreting function(s) of accounts/discourses. Focus on subject positions, ideological dilemmas, and strategies outlined in Wood & Kroger (2000).
Sub-step 19: Practice	Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Willig, 2001	'Discursive constructions and the subject positions contained within them open up or close down opportunities for action. By constructing particular versions of the world, and by positioning subjects within the in particular ways, discourses limit what can be said and done' (Willig, 2001: 111).	Interpreting the effects of participants' accounts and arguments for change; elaborating this project's recommendations for discursive change.
Sub-step 20: Warrantability	Yardley, 2000; Wood & Kroger, 2000	Quality check in social constructionist / critical realist research.	Sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance (Yardley, 2000); coherence, plausibility & fruitfulness (Wood & Kroger, 2000)

Table 6: This study's discourse analytical approach, based on Coyle, 2007; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Sunderland, 2004; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Willig (2001); Wood & Kroger, 2000, and Yardley, 2000.

Transitioning from step 1 (TA) to step 2 (DA) of the analysis required a shift in approach to the data, i.e. what Potter & Wetherell (1987) call 'suspension of belief'. This involved re-reading and re-listening to the data, questioning what is normally taken for granted and 'seeing linguistic practices [...] as constructing and legitimating a version of events' (Coyle, 2007: 106). Wood & Kroger's 15 steps to 'adopt the discourse-analytic orientation' (2000: 92 ff.) were particularly useful to achieve this shift in approach.

Re-reading and re-listening to the data was also key in the next analytical sub-step (9 & 17), which involved looking for discursive patterns shared by accounts (i.e. patterns in discursive constructions, Willig, 2001) as well as variability in the ways in which the discursive objects (i.e. the foci of the RQs) were constructed in the data (Coyle, 2007, Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Part of this analytical sub-step was also the identification or 'tracing' (Sunderland, 2004) of wider (gendered) discourses, 'within which the discursive constructions are located' (Coyle, 2007: 106). As 'sets of linguistic material that have a degree of coherence in their content and organisation' (Coyle, 2007: 101), (gendered) discourses can be 'traced' or 'spotted' by the discourse analyst, who will then look for the linguistic evidence or traces (Sunderland, 2004). Alternatively,

the discourse analyst may spot recurrent linguistic features, or a set of phrases which echo those in another text or genre, which suggest a particular discourse (Ibid: 3).

Either way, 'tracing' discourses is an interpretative (and iterative) task, which is why the boundaries between this project's data analysis and interpretation (cf. Table 6, p.92, sub-steps 9 & 10; 17 & 18), were rather blurry (and also why this thesis does not feature separate chapters for "results" and "discussion").

Discourse identification is almost always interpretive (Sunderland, 2004), first of all because discourses ought to be recognisable. Put differently, in order for the analyst to be able to identify or 'spot' discourses, linguistic traces need to be relatable to a historically, locally and socially situated and contingent, shared set of assumptions, expectations, values and beliefs. Secondly, in 'tracing' discourses, the analyst becomes involved in the co-construction of meaning by bringing in their background knowledge and their own 'ways of seeing the world' (Sunderland, 2004: 6). Discourses (and accounts) are thus co-produced by participants *and* the moderator/analyst (not least because it is the moderator/analyst who occasions and interprets participants' talk). Finally, discourse identification and naming is an iterative process which goes hand-in-hand with an interpretation of their functions and effects.

The latter involves focusing on what participants are “doing” when they are producing a specific account / drawing on a specific discourse in a specific way and at a specific point in the interaction, and what consequences are implicated on the wider social context.

The interpretative focus (sub-steps 10 & 18) was thus on content, structure, function and effects of accounts and discourse(s). Broadly speaking, interpretation was conducted by asking some key questions of the data:

- how are participants’ accounts structured, organised and constructed;
- how do these accounts in turn construct the discursive objects (i.e. the foci of the RQs);
- what are the functions of these accounts, i.e. what are they used to do (e.g. legitimising, contesting etc.);
- what are the consequences and effects of such constructions, bearing in mind this project’s aim of social transformation

(adapted from Potter & Wetherell 1987; Kelan, 2009a).

In practice, the strategies outlined by Wood & Kroger (2000: 107 ff.; e.g. substitution; reframing, participants’ meanings; and sensitivity to variations, exceptions, and apparent contradictions) were useful to reflect on the functions of a given stretch of talk or use of (gendered) discourse, and to ground interpretations by highlighting linguistic evidence. While in the previous sub-step the search for discursive patterns involved a search for consistency and overlaps, when looking at discursive functions a focus on variability was key. This is because as

variability arises from the different functions that the discourse may be fulfilling, the nature of the variation can provide clues to what these functions are (Coyle, 2007: 108).

Of particular concern was understanding what subject positions (cf. 4.1.2) were made available to speakers (and those spoken about) when drawing on specific discourses. Analytically interesting were especially those subject positions which are somehow conflicting, and how ‘ideological dilemmas’ (Billig et al, 1988) were navigated by participants. For example, Chapter 10 critically reflects on the patterned ways in which participants navigate the ideological dilemma created by their own construction of HEA as a “family/female-friendly” work environment, where gender is (reportedly) irrelevant, vis-à-vis the vertical and horizontal gender imbalance they were asked to account for.

By affording specific subject positions to those producing or being produced by them, discourses can ‘open up or close down opportunities for action’ (Willig, 2001:

111). Sub-step 19 thus drew on Willig's 'practice' stage in critical realist discourse analysis, which involves exploring how

by constructing particular versions of the world and by positioning subjects within them in particular ways, discourses limit what can be said and done (Willig, 2001: 111).

Particular attention was given to what Sunderland defines as the 'social and political significance of discourses' (2004: 4, cf. 4.1.2) and how they operate in networks to 'justify injustice' (Kelan, 2009a: 57), or in other words, to 'privilege versions of social reality that accord with and reinforce existing social structures and networks of power relations associated with them' (Coyle, 2007: 102). A key focus lay in exposing and critiquing the use of common-sense, taken-for-granted and contradictory accounts and (gendered) discourses (cf. 4.1.2), in that these are 'essential to [...] the operation of ideology and its maintenance' (Wetherell et al, 1987: 69), or, in other words, to the maintenance of discursive barriers to change in the gender-imbalanced status quo.

In practice, the sub-step 19 consisted of a critical reflection on the effects of discursive constructions and patterned accounts (cf. Chapters 6-10), including those produced by participants when arguing in favour of (or against) actions to change the gender imbalance (cf. Chapters 10 & 11). In addition to deconstruction and critique, key was also the formulation of recommendations for discursive change in light of the overall data analysis and interpretation. Critique of damaging discourses, patterned accounts and discursive barriers was thus counterpointed by an emphasis on subversive use of counter-discourses to potentially emancipatory effects (cf. Chapter 12). Finally, analysis and interpretation were 'quality checked' against warrantability principles (sub-step 20, cf. Table 7).

Warrantability principle	Examples
Sensitivity to context	Theoretical; relevant literature; empirical data; sociocultural setting; participants' perspectives; ethical issues.
Commitment & Rigour	In-depth engagement with topic; methodological competence/skill; thorough data collection; depth/breadth of analysis.
Transparency & Coherence	Clarity and power of description/argument; transparent methods and data presentation; fit between theory and method: reflexivity.
Grounding/ Demonstration	Showing how the interpretations of individual excerpts (the subclaims) as well as the overall claims (about patterns and their interpretations) are grounded in the text
Plausibility	Validity as in the Latin <i>valere</i> : to be strong. Claims should be plausible, sensible, convincing, trustworthy and sound.
Impact & Importance (Fruitfulness)	Theoretical (enriching understanding); methodological; socio-cultural; practical (for community, policy makers etc.)

Table 7: Warrantability principles/characteristics of good qualitative/discursive research. Adapted from Wood & Kroger (2000: 167-174) and Yardley (2000: 219 ff.).

The next sub-section provides a visual and explanatory overview of the main “results”, i.e. of the themes, accounts and discourses co-constructed in the data sets, and signposts in which chapters further discussion can be found.

5.5. Themes, accounts and discourses: an overview

Themes, sub-themes (patterns in content), accounts and discourses (patterns of similarity and variation in participants’ ways of talking about these themes) are summarised and visualised (cf. Figures 3-10) in the rest of this section, and explored in detail in the next chapters. Overarching themes (for a definition, cf. 5.3) were developed later on in the analysis by grouping themes, but are presented first here (cf. Figure 3) for clarity.

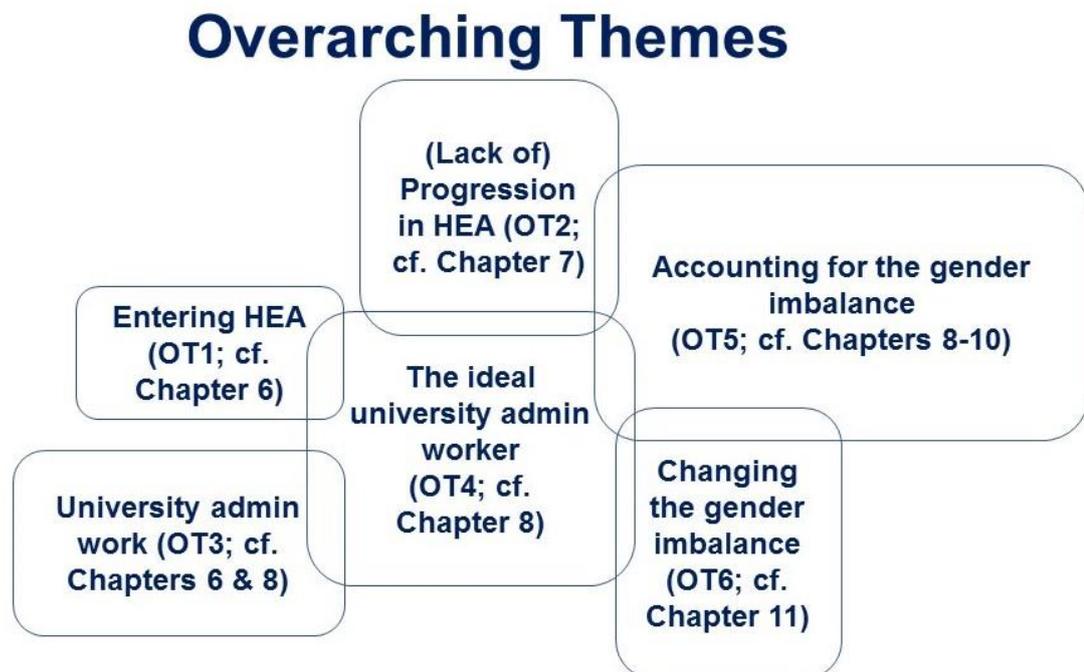


Figure 3: Overarching Themes (OTs). They are represented as overlapping as there are relationships and overlaps between the themes grouped in the OTs.

Participants’ talk about ‘entering HEA’ (cf. Figure 4) is explored in Section 6.2. With almost no exception, participants talk about “falling into” HEA by chance or accident, when looking for a job and/or temping, or as a side effect of life events. Some mention using it as a “stopgap” or a “springboard” to some other “proper career”. Expectations of HEA as a public-sector work environment reportedly (but only in hindsight) played a role in participants’ falling into university administration. Once in HEA, participants talk about either getting stuck or choosing to stay in such “nice” public-sector job, characterised by perks like good work-life balance, supportive colleagues and a stimulating environment.

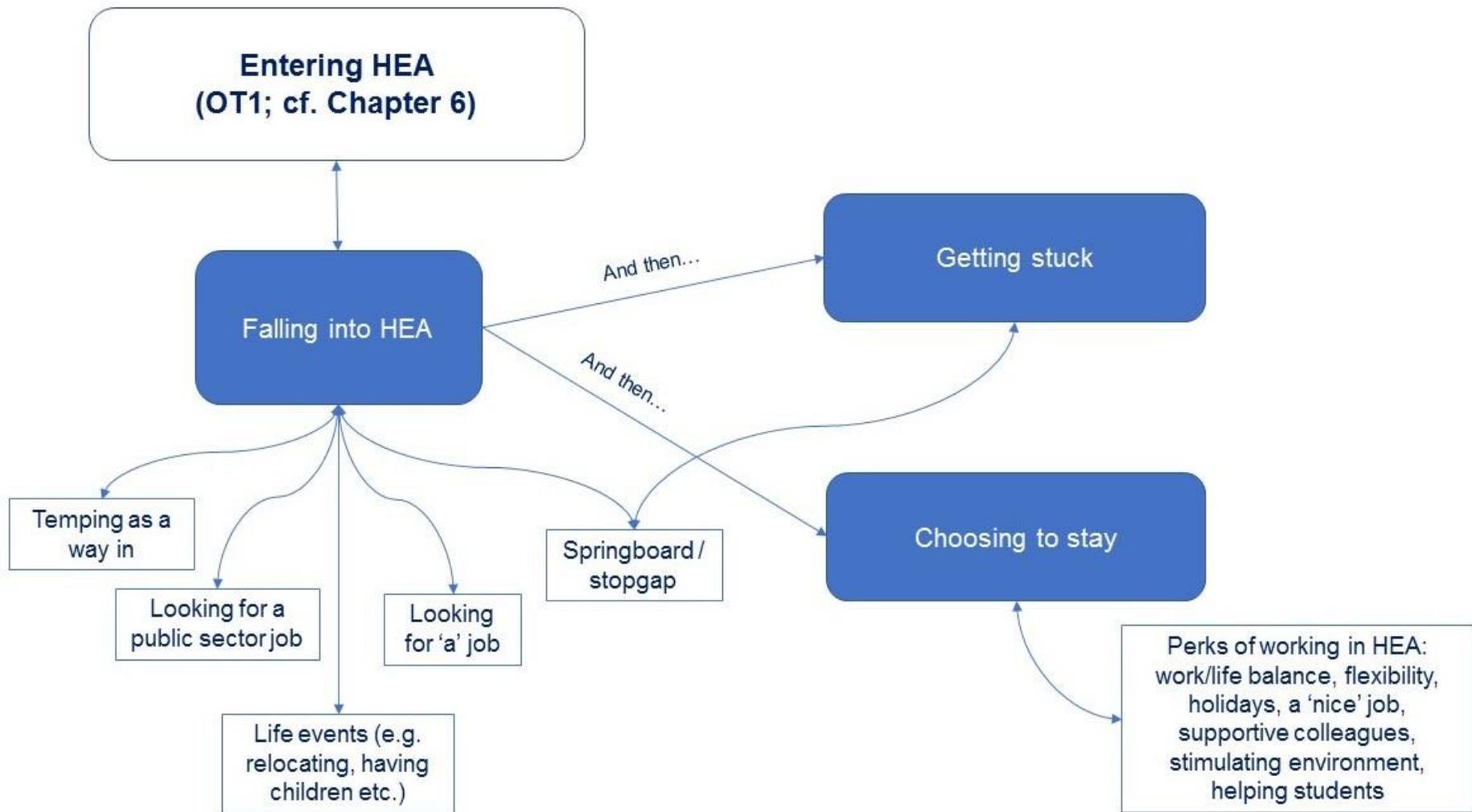


Figure 4. OT1: Entering HEA. Themes are represented in blue rounded squares; sub-themes in white squares. Arrows represent relationships.

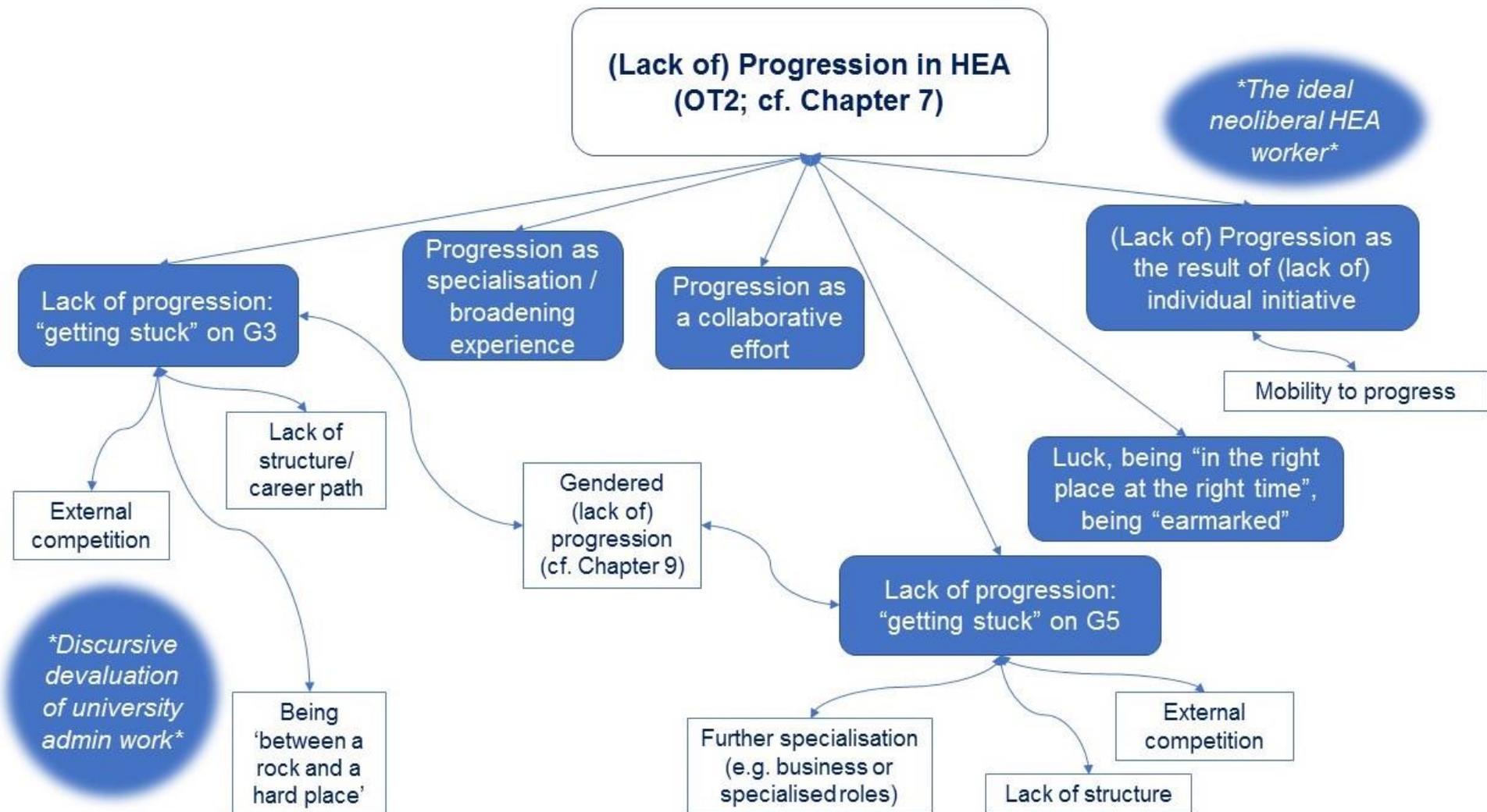


Figure 5. OT2: (Lack of) Progression in HEA. Discourses are represented as blurry circles, to visualise their “fuzzy”, fluid boundaries.

Talk clustered around the overarching theme of career progression (OT2; cf. Figure 5) is explored in Chapter 7. FG participants recurrently talk about getting stuck on G3, due to the lack of structure and career path available to lower-level generalist administrators. Internal progression is made more difficult, they argue, because of external competition for the rare G6 vacancies that arise, and the fact that administrators are denied access to developmental training. FG participants tend to make sense of these factors as the material consequence of the dominant devaluation of their work (cf. OT3, Figure 6).

Managers' and leavers' talk about progression is more varied. Across the board, progression tends to be made sense of as broadening one's expertise to then specialise in a particular area. At times, progression for G2/G3s is described as a collaborative effort of managers and staff in the face of structural impediments. When talking about their own progression, managers sometimes mention luck, being "in the right place, at the right time", being "earmarked", or getting stuck. Often, however, a more individualistic discourse prevails, constructing (lack of) progression as the outcome of (lack of) personal entrepreneurship, including working long hours, "keeping your mouth shut" and mobility. Managers also mention getting stuck at their current level, due to increasing external competition from the corporate world, lack of structure / career path, and the further specialisation required to progress to senior management. These competing accounts are explored in Section 7.2; how (lack of) progression is discursively gendered when accounting for the vertical imbalance is discussed in Chapter 9.

A notable difference between administrators' and managers' talk about "getting stuck" is that the former tend to make sense of it as the material consequence of the dominant devaluation of their work as "just admin" and of them as "just administrators". OT3 (cf. Figure 6) comprises participants' talk about 'university admin work'. Chapter 6 explores in detail the discursive devaluation of such work as easy, mundane, boring, routine and unskilled or, as M11 puts it, work that 'no-one likes', and of administrators as 'pencil-pushing all-talk people' (Nikki, FG7) lacking the 'ambition', 'motivation' and 'intellectual vigour' (L3) to pursue a "proper" career. As Eveline (2004) pointed out, there are four dimensions to the devaluation of university admin as 'ivory basement' work, which are also traceable in the FG data set: lack of crediting of knowledge and expertise, lack of authority and ownership over one's time, space and workload; lack of development opportunities; lack of career opportunities (cf. OT2). Finally, Chapter 6 explores a counter-discourse participants produce when contesting the dominant devaluation of university admin work.

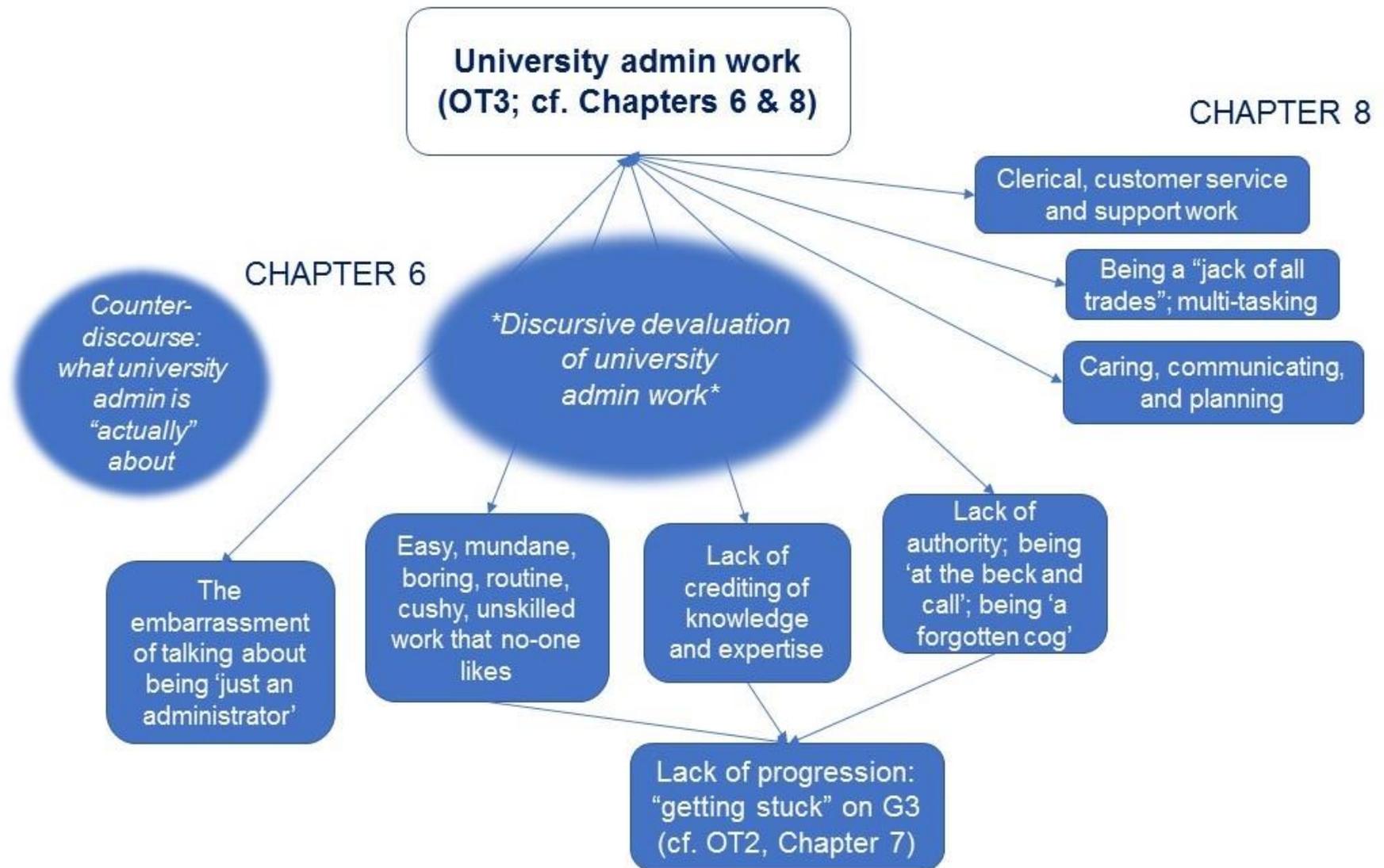


Figure 6. OT3: University admin

Chapter 8 discusses participants' talk about the skills required to be the ideal university admin worker (cf. OT3, Figure 6, and OT4, Figure 7). During the first half of the research encounters (cf. Questioning Routes, Appendices D and E.i-iii), gender is hardly if ever mentioned. Once participants are prompted to account for the over-representation of women in lower-level generalist admin roles, however, the skills required to be a good university administrator are re-framed as gendered. This results in the discursive feminisation of the ideal university admin worker (cf. OT4, Figure 7). Regardless of whether skills are talked about as "actually" or "stereotypically" gendered, participants end up drawing on a dominant gender difference discourse to account for the horizontal imbalance in HEA. This ultimately works to construct women as (stereo)typically "better" and men as "not good enough" at university admin work. When participants construct women as only stereotypically better at university admin work, they tend to make sense of their over-representation in lower-level admin roles as a sign of what they call 'positive discrimination', or women's advantage (cf. 8.3 for further discussion).

Chapter 9 focuses on the discursive interplay between the devaluation and feminisation of university admin work and workers. It explores how such gendered devaluation is drawn upon by participants to account for the vertical gender imbalance (OT5, cf. Figure 8). Women end up being constructed as "better" at what is discursively devalued work, and often also as lacking the skills required to progress (e.g. confidence, ambition, networking and negotiating skills). Men are instead regularly constructed as feeling, being, and/or being considered as "too good" for devalued women's work such as university admin, and therefore as aiming – and/or being encouraged to aim – for 'bigger and better jobs' (M13, i.e. management and specialised/professional roles). Participants also recurrently draw on (often gendered) "them and us" oppositions, establishing binaries between (female and male; good and bad) administrators; (female) administrators and (male senior) academics; (female) administrators and (male) senior managers.

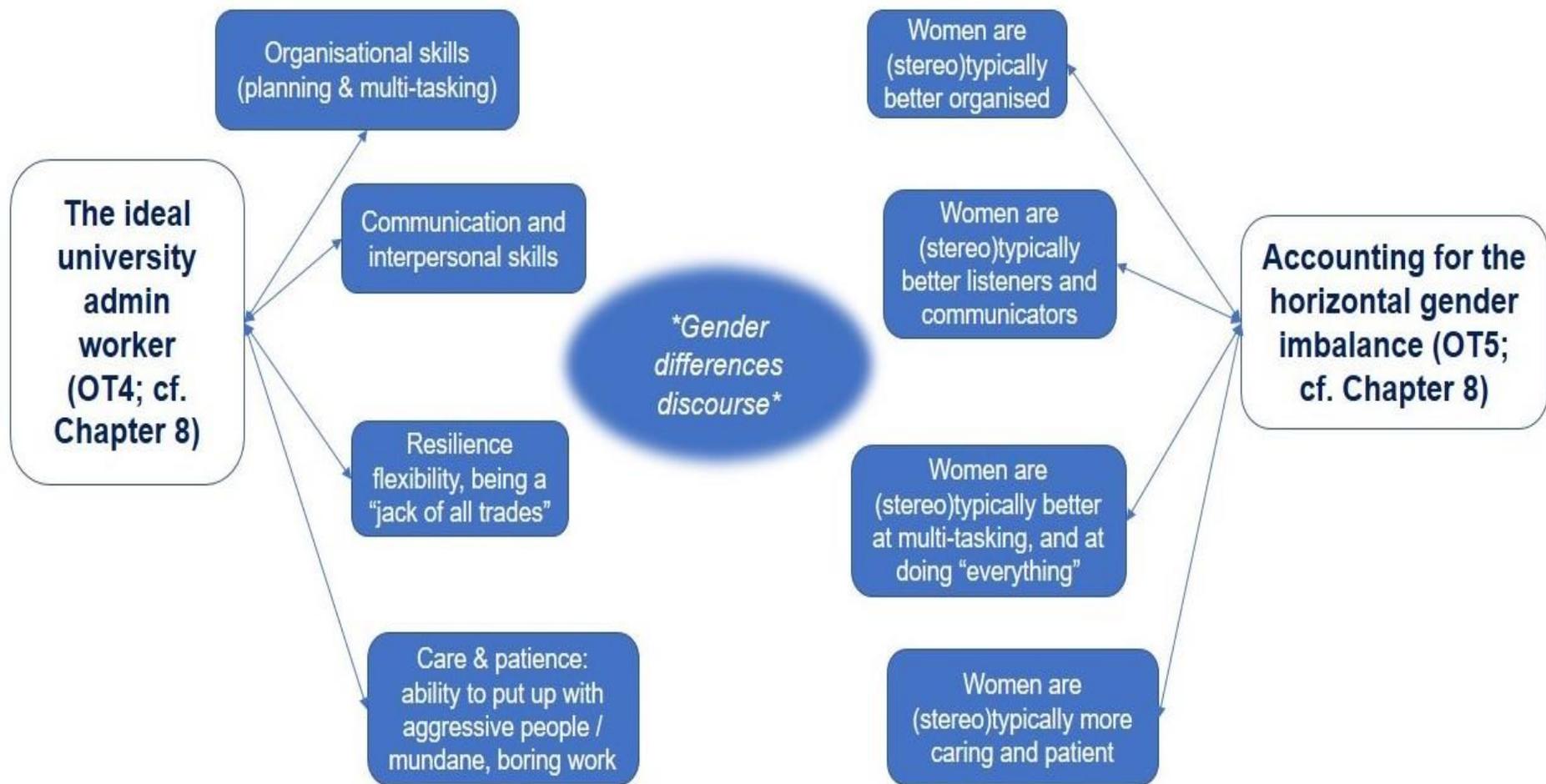


Figure 7. OT4 & OT5: Accounting for the horizontal gender imbalance by feminising the ideal university admin worker

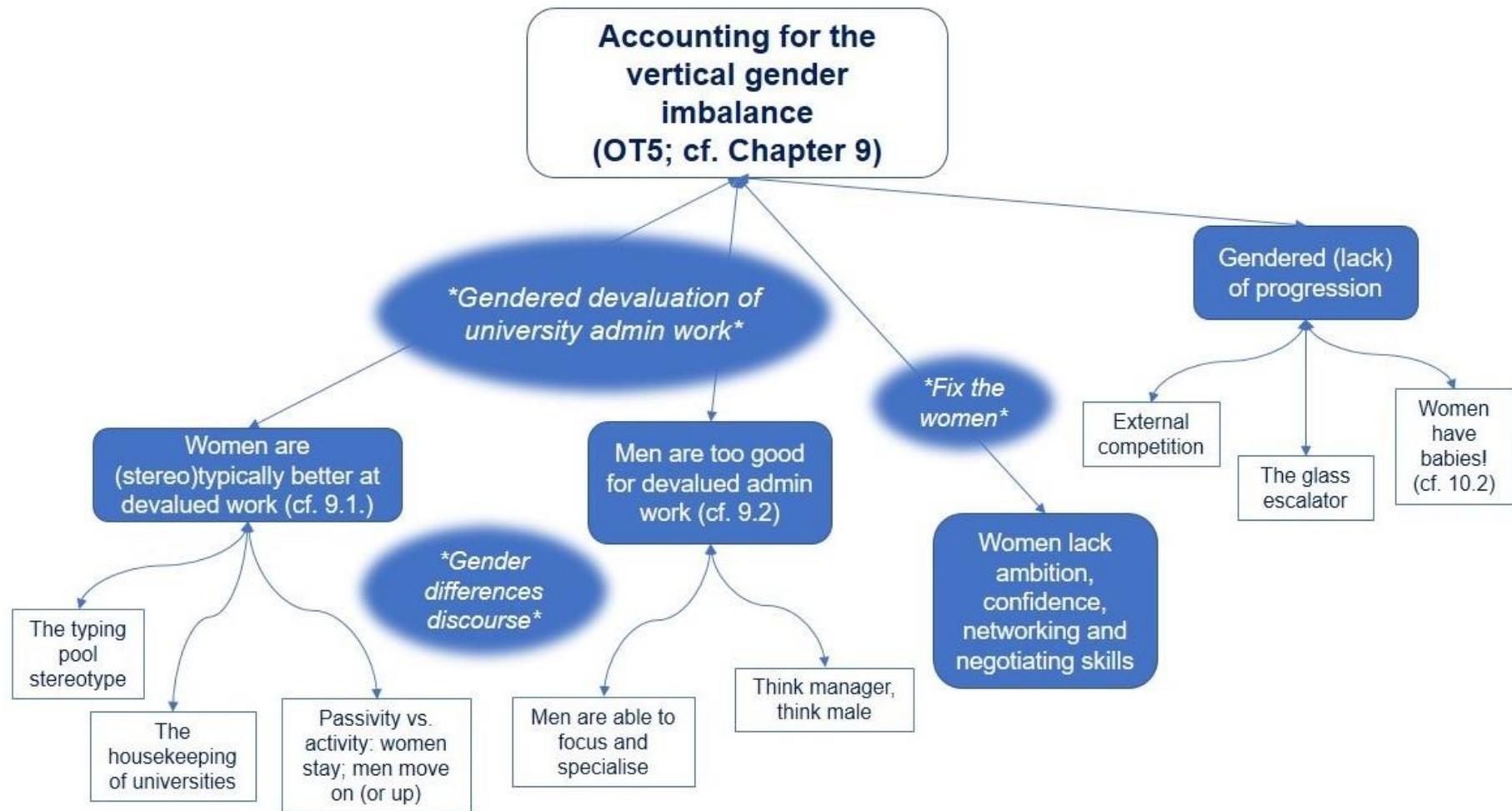


Figure 8. OT5: Accounting for the vertical gender imbalance

When asked to account for the gender imbalance, participants tend to co-produce patterned accounts which ultimately work to repudiate the existence of gender inequality/discrimination in HE(A), and simultaneously reinforce its construction as a meritocratic, egalitarian and family/female-friendly employment sector. Chapter 10 discusses these patterned accounts as elements of a postfeminist sensibility at work (Gill et al, 2017) and critiques their ideological effects, i.e. how they end up legitimising the gender-imbalanced status-quo and diminishing the rationale for action and change (cf. 4.1.2). Participants tend to distance themselves from the gender imbalance by re-constructing it as not representative of their experience, as “not here” (i.e. in their office, department or institution), “not now” (i.e. as the residual effect of past gender roles and inequalities), “not that bad” or “not just in HEA” (i.e. worse in the private sector), and “just the way it is” (cf. 10.1).

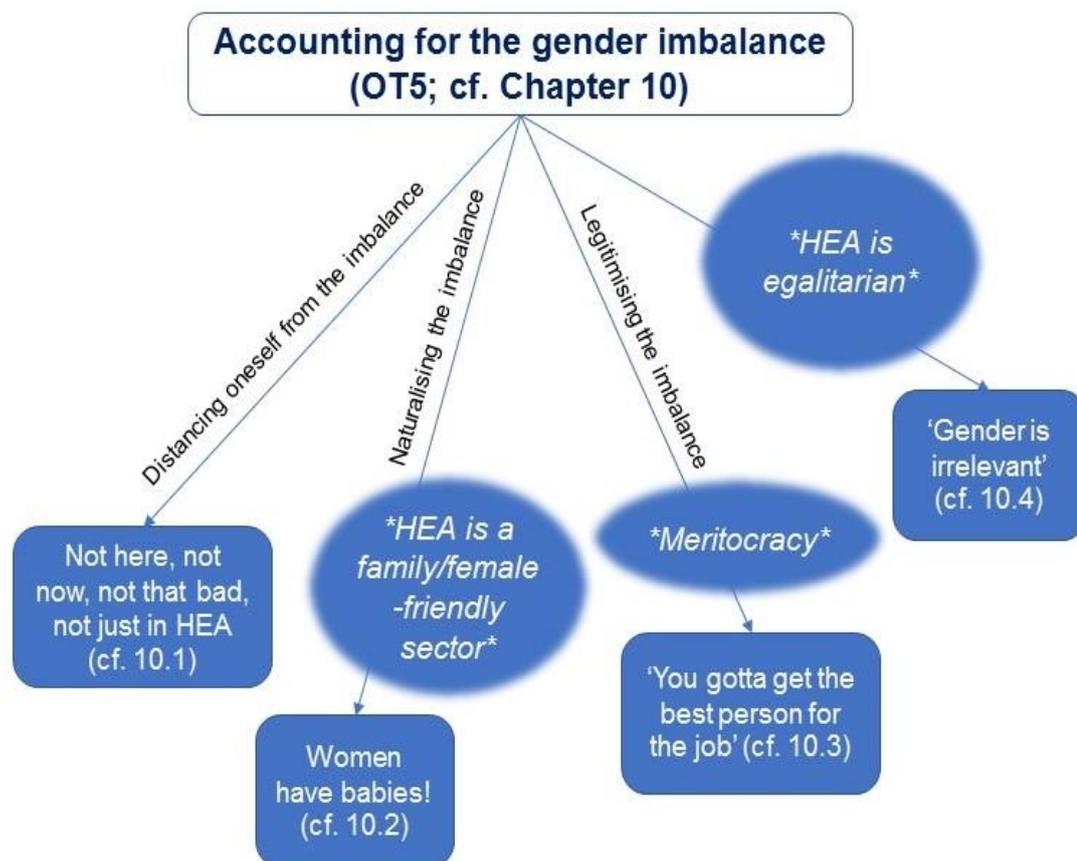


Figure 9. OT5: Accounting for the gender imbalance

When asked about *women's* relative over-representation in university administrative and secretarial roles, and their relative under-representation on higher grades, participants regularly answer about *mothers*. Constructing all women in HEA as mothers allows participants to account for both the horizontal and vertical gender imbalance in HEA as the side-effects of “natural events” such as motherhood and

childcare (cf. 10.2). Women-as-mothers are said to be attracted to (entry-level roles) in “family-friendly” HEA. Once in HEA, however, women-as-mothers reportedly get stuck because they have not acquired enough uninterrupted work experience to progress, and are not able to work full-time/long hours in these high-responsibility, strategic roles. By regularly stating that the “best” candidate for the role should be appointed, participants end up legitimising the vertical imbalance as the side effect of meritocracy (cf. 10.3). According to this co-produced account, acting to change the imbalance would involve promoting less deserving women *just because* they are women. In other words, it would entail “making gender relevant” in HE(A), a sector consistently constructed as already egalitarian (cf. 10.4).

That these patterned accounts diminish the rationale for action and change is also supported by participants’ tendency to state they are ‘not bothered’ or do not particularly want to see the imbalance change – especially not at the expense of competence. Some participants do argue in favour of acting to change the gender imbalance (OT6, cf. Figure 10, p.106, and Chapter 11). Some of the ways in which they do so can be interpreted as potentially emancipatory (i.e. as challenging the gender-unequal status quo); others, instead, as working to ideological effects (as discussed in 4.1.2; pp. 62-4), by relying on damaging discourses such as an overarching gender differences discourse. Participants’ suggestions for change cluster around three main areas for action: acting at key career transition points (KCTPs, e.g. gendered recruitment and gendered progression), acting to change the “culture” and, bringing the two together, taking a holistic, systematic, embedded approach to change (cf. Section 11.2).

The next chapter discusses the dominant discursive devaluation of university admin work, and explores talk clustered around OT3.

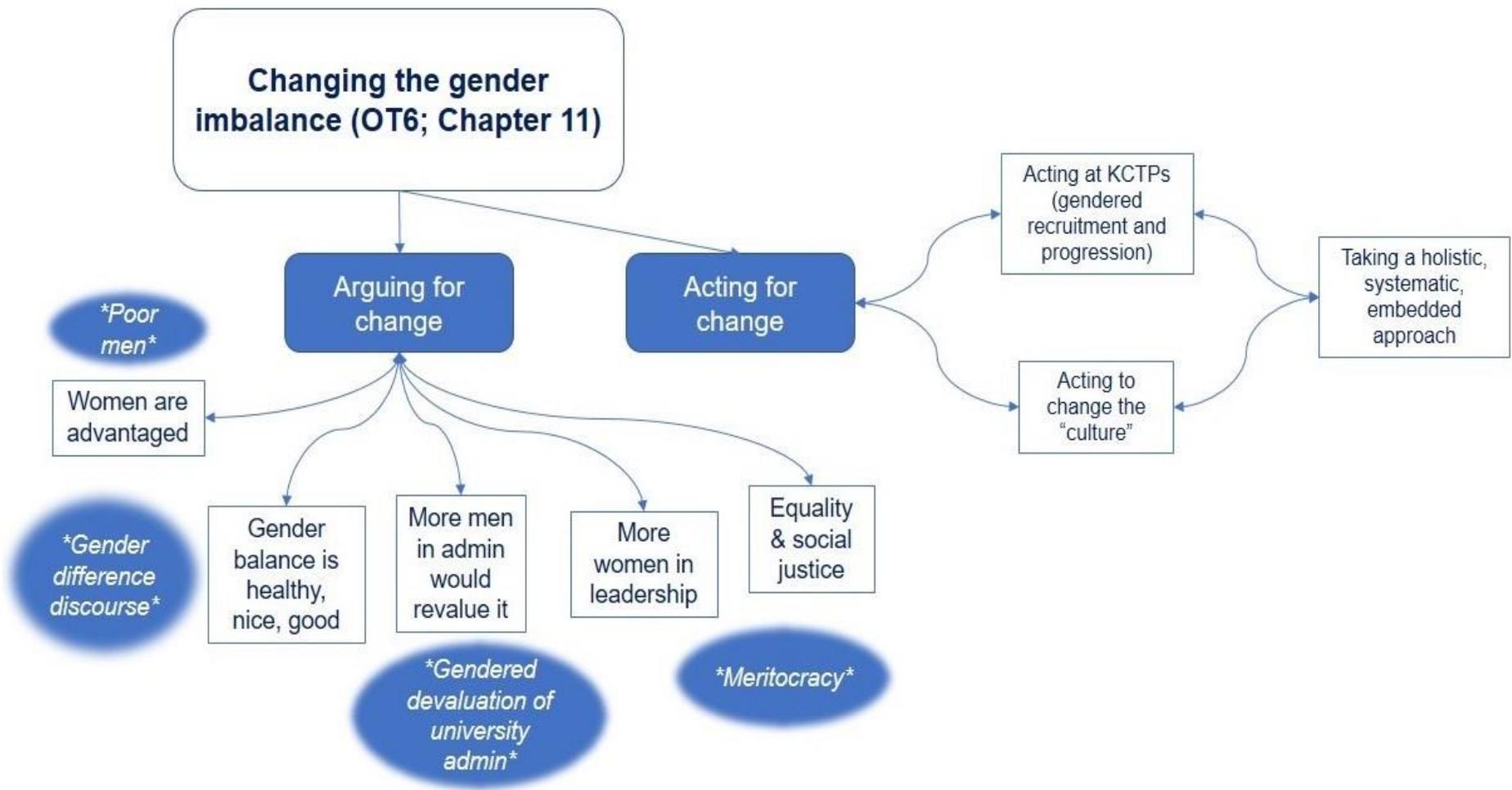


Figure 10. OT6: Changing the gender imbalance

Chapter 6. The Discursive Devaluation of University “Admin”

The devaluation of lower-level, generalist university administrators’ work is a reoccurring theme in the handful of studies conducted on this HE staff group (cf. 2.3). For example, they are described as a ‘forgotten’, hidden workforce (Castleman & Allen, 1995: 65; Tong, 2014) doing devalued ‘ivory basement’ work (Eveline, 2004: 143). Commentators have proposed to discard the term administrator altogether (e.g. Lauwerys, 2002), because its association with ‘routine clerical tasks’ (Whitchurch, 2004a: 282) has allegedly resulted in the ‘downgrading of the concept of administration’ (Whitchurch, 2013: 9).

This chapter aims to tease out how the devaluation of university “admin” (i.e. lower-level generalist administration) is articulated in discourse. Section 6.1 looks at how university admin is discursively constructed as boring, easy, mundane, routine, unimportant, cushy work. Section 6.2 critically examines participants’ talk about entering HEA. The prevailing tendency is for participants to report ‘falling into’ HEA by chance or accident, or using it as a stopgap or a springboard to some other “proper career”. University admin is consistently talked about as a job, work that nobody could possibly ever choose. Participants also mention feelings of embarrassment when talking about what they do for a living in social situations. They reportedly cope with this feeling via strategies such as “hyping it up”, or “playing it down”. Section 6.3 interprets these and other strategies as participants’ ways to navigate the social and discursive devaluation of their work.

Eveline (2004) claims that there are four dimensions to the devaluation of university ‘ivory basement’ work: two of these (lack of control over time and space, lack of crediting of expertise) are explored in Section 6.4 by reflecting on patterns co-constructed in the FG data set²⁸. Finally, Section 6.5 explores a counter-discourse articulated by participants in (implicit and explicit) opposition with the dominant discourse of devaluation. It is argued that such discursive clash has potentially emancipatory effects (as defined in 4.1.2, p.64).

²⁸ Chapter 7 discusses the other two dimensions: lack of development and of progression opportunities.

6.1. 'No-one likes boring admin work do they': university admin as easy, dull, unimportant work

Talk about university admin as boring, mundane, easy, unimportant work constitutes a strong pattern especially in the FG data set. An interesting distinction can be made in terms of who "produces" this talk. At times, participants appear to uphold this discourse of devaluation. More often though, they tend to draw on it to describe what "other people think" about administrators and the work they do.

An example of the first tendency is provided by those participants who describe parts of their job as 'mind-numbing' (Beck, FG6); who say that looking through documentation 'can send you to sleep at times' (Joan, FG4), and that minute-taking and being 'sat at your desk' carrying out tasks which are 'more admin.. intensive [...] is very boring' (Anna, FG2; L7). L2 expresses regret at employing someone 'who after six months got totally bored' and 'deflated', and left. Admin tasks are frequently constructed as mundane and unimportant. Bev for example states that 'the buck stops with us when it comes to... menial stuff' (FG5).

FG participants also comment on the repetitive, routine nature of their work, organised around the academic cycle. For example, Calvin compares university admin to factory work, a 'working-class type of role' (FG1), when he describes the repetitive, unskilled, manual-like (e.g. data entry) aspects of it. The 'white-collar', office-based nature of university admin is instead drawn upon to construct it as 'comfortable' work: 'you get to sit down... have a chat with your colleagues' (Kat, FG2). Work whilst seated is 'cushy': it does not involve 'running around', i.e. it is neither hectic nor particularly stressful:

I find it very... cushy.. most of the time.. I don't find that I'm.. usually running around.. or if I am.. I'm like.. typing really fast.. it's not the same stresses as in other.. jobs I've had (Jodie, FG3)

University administrators are described as comfortably seated for most of their working day, apart from when they need to stand up 'to make a cup of tea' (e.g. M12):

I think it's sometimes the pressures people are under.. -- if they come in to an office where... maybe they've just stepped in at that point <@when you're having a smile and a cup of tea@> [*slows down; all: @*] they... might think that you're not doing anything (Victoria, FG4)

The construction of university admin as cushy work goes hand in hand with expectations and assumptions of HE/public sector work as being 'a different pace' (Yokow, FG5) when compared to the private, corporate sector:

There's... a perception about universities being sort of... less stressful than a lot of industries I suppose.. not the kind of place where you're working till 9 or 10 o'clock every night.. on all nights of the week (Nick, FG6)

'Perceptions' of the sector are reportedly of a relaxed, almost stress-free environment. University admin in particular is constructed as work that can be done 9-5, ensuring a very good work-life balance, especially when compared to other jobs, industries, or HEA management roles (cf. 6.2; Chapter 7; Chapter 10 for a discussion how this is used to account for the over-representation of women in these jobs).

Participants' talk about what "other people think" of university admin allows for an investigation of how dominant the discursive devaluation of this type of work currently is in our society and within the UK HE sector in particular. The following data excerpts (considered alongside those analysed in 6.3) exemplify how participants make sense of the societal and sectorial devaluation of "admin" work, which, as Whitchurch argues, is closely linked to its association with 'routine clerical tasks' (2004a: 282). For example, in FG2 Kat states that 'other people think' university administrators are 'envelope stuffers' who spend their time filing and stamping. FG7 participants also discuss how their work is undervalued (also cf. 6.4):

Nikki: I think there's a lot of knowledge that we have as administrators that people think we don't have.. they think that we make spreadsheets and... put things on the data systems=
Efi: =and print!
Priya: Pick up the [phone]
Nikki: [invo]ice people and pick up the phone

(FG7)

Later on, Nikki states that people who do not work in university administration also tend to say: 'oh it's just.. it's *just* administration [...] bureaucracy... that horrible stuff that no-one wants to be involved with', and think of administrators as 'some kind of.. jobsworthy pencil-pushing all-talk' people. University administrators are constructed as pedantic rule-followers, and admin as repetitive, unskilled, easy, mundane work.

Nikki's quote also provides an example of a very strong pattern in the FG data set: the use of *just* before the words administration and administrator. As the following extract from a university administrator's blog suggests, this is a common pattern beyond this study's data set (also cf. 6.3):

If you work as an administrator within university administration, how do you define yourself, when asked by others "What do you do for a living?" [...] Many of us have a standard answer to the effect of "I work at the University of Kent", but more often than not, this is usually met with the reply "Oh, are you an academic?" to which we meekly reply "No, I'm just an administrator".

Sometimes, (deliberately or not), the emphasis of our intonation falls on the word “just”, almost as if we are apologising for our profession and slightly embarrassed by it.

Labels at work are important. Take for example, the term “non-academic”. Should we be defined by what we are not? The term, “the admin team” can sometimes convey a sense of dumbing down and even the term “support staff” has an upstairs/downstairs flavour about it. [...] Shouldn't we be proud of being a university administrator? (Butler, 2014)

Saying ‘I’m just an administrator’ constructs being an administrator as not much of a career achievement, not much to be proud of, and university administration as mundane and unimportant – especially when compared to academic work. The ‘oft-bruited suggestion that university staff have jobs, whereas faculty have careers’ (Losinger, 2015: 160, citing Corson, 1975 and Perkins, 1973) could be what lies behind the embarrassment and apologetic tone of those saying they’re ‘just’ administrators (also cf. 6.3), as they come to terms with the dominant discursive devaluation (‘a sense of dumbing down’, a ‘downstairs flavour about it’) of doing admin work and being part of ‘the admin team’.

If, as Nikki puts it, “other people think” that admin is ‘that horrible stuff’ that ‘no-one wants to be involved with’ (FG7), it is perhaps not surprising that some participants distance themselves from the label administrator:

What I like the least about it... (2) some of the things... that are... say.. quite admin-intensive and it's impossible to avoid that.. -- it's not as though I feel like.. I'm better than that and I shouldn't be doing that... but.. no-one likes.. boring admin work do they [...] those kind of bits can be.. a bit mundane and frustrating.. [...] I don't ever.. refer to myself as an administrator I always refer to myself as like.. professional services.. as opposed to the academic side... you tell somebody who doesn't know anything about what we do... – “what do you do?”... and it usually starts with “I work at a university”.. <@“are you an academic”.. “no I'm not”@> and.. I always go for like “no I work on the professional services side” [...] but yeah.. you fill out forms and you get a drop-down list of what your job is.. usually I have to just roll with university administration all the time.. but I just.. don't think that's a very fair .. -- it's just people... (1.5) -- the term administration is viewed differently by different people isn't it.. and sometimes it can be viewed as quite menial.. quite... lowly I suppose (M11)

M11’s resistance or refusal to define himself as a university administrator is linked to societal perceptions/constructions of admin work as ‘menial’ and ‘lowly’. His use of a disclaimer: ‘it’s not as though I feel like.. I’m better than that [...] but..’ is a case in point. M11’s words chime with research administrators and managers’ attempts, in Allen-Collinson’s study, to distance themselves from the ‘secretarial dross’ and the ‘secretarial mundanities’ their job involves (2007: 302; cf. Chapter 2). This resistance is a common pattern in the data set and is further explored in 6.3.

The next section critically considers participants' ways of talking about entering HEA vis-à-vis the dominant societal and sectorial devaluation of admin as 'boring' work that 'no-one likes' (M11).

6.2. Falling into HEA

I don't think [university administration] is one of those... kind of.. careers that people would be like.. <@“I really wanna work in university administration”@> I think most people do just fall into it? [...] I've never met anyone who's like <@“what's your dream”.. “to work in a university”@> (M6)

In addition to 'falling into' HEA, participants report 'landing in it' or 'ending up' in it 'by chance' (e.g. M2) or 'by accident', which Jodie describes as 'the usual route' (FG3). University administration is often talked about as something participants got into when they were looking for 'a' job, i.e. any job, especially straight out of university, and/or when looking for a career change without knowing exactly what this new career should be:

I don't know why.. I was doing a job before this that [...] I hated.. so then I took.. a month off and I didn't know what I wanted to do?.. so I just applied for everything really... when I got the job I just.. took it (Mel, FG9)

Participants also recurrently state they 'just happen' to be working in administration at the moment: Stacey's first role in HEA 'happened to be the job [she] was offered' (FG5); Efie and Monica (FG7) just 'happen to be here':

I was just looking for a job really.. and that's.. what the temp agency had at the time and that's what I applied for so [...] it just so happens that.. okay I've now got this job.. but that's just because of different circumstances job availability and all that.. but this is not.. something that I wanted to do and it's not something I intend to do for the long term anyway (Efie, FG7)

Entering HEA is often constructed as a “side effect”: of circumstances, the lack of opportunities in other fields, or some other life event, such as, for example, relocating to a different city or country (e.g. Jodie, FG3; Lucy, FG8; M2; M8; M9). A few participants mention somewhat “gendered” reasons for entering HEA, related to motherhood and being the primary carer (cf. RQ1; for further discussion, cf. 6.6. and Chapter 10):

After my maternity leave... there was an organisation.. [name] who helps women to get back into... work after maternity... because part-time jobs are very rare... so... somebody encouraged me to apply for.. an administrator role (Camille, FG3)

I actually.. was a PA.. all my life and then.. when I had my daughter I took a few years off work?.. and then it was quite difficult? to get back into.. into work after

four or five years.. I'd missed a lot of skills.. and university was much lower-paid? than.. equivalent jobs [...] I had less competition.. so I came here and I'm still here.... no longer a PA (Pam, FG9)

A stronger tendency is for participants to mention they were looking for an office job, and ended up in HEA. After stating she 'sort of fell into it', L5 provides an account of how she got into university admin which constructs 'an office job' as a valid, decent occupational option for a young (working-class) woman:

I was working.. <@[in the beauty industry]@> and I knew.. if I wanted to do more I had to move on [...] I thought I need to move on into a sort of.. office job [...] I knew I had to.. that was how I felt "I need to get into an office job" [...] then [a *relative*] saw a job that was working with students.. [...] and I thought "oh that sounds good because... I wouldn't be stuck in a desk... it'd be.. a bit of office work.. but also with students" (L5)

L5 also touches upon what Losinger defined as 'the lure of the university as a workplace' for the 'uninitiated' (2015: 156; cf. later this section).

Another pattern is co-constructed by participants talking about HE as part of the public sector. These participants also report looking for a public sector job and falling into HEA. For example, Natalie states that she 'always wanted to work in the public sector' and defines her first role in university admin was 'a way into.. a sector that I want to be in' (FG3). Considering HE as part of the public sector frames participants' narratives of how they entered HEA, of the perks of working in HEA (cf. later this section), and of their expectations before starting. The main tendency is for participants to state they had no specific expectations prior to their first job in HEA, other than expectations of public sector work(ers), or of it being 'like the other office admin roles' (Anna, FG2). This was to be expected, due to HEA's location (both physical and metaphorical) 'beyond the limelight' (Bosworth, 1986) of the main academic act:

When I was at university I didn't really even realise there was a course office.. <@behind it@> [...] we never saw anyone.. we put.. everything into <@pigeon holes@>.. and then.. it reappeared back in the pigeon holes @ (M2)

Participants who report having expectations of HEA work before starting – for example because they had friends or family working in HEA (e.g. M4; Nikki, FG7) – tend to talk about job flexibility and security, work-life balance, extra-curricular activities, a supportive, young, "social" and stress-free environment, and long holidays (cf. later, this section, for further discussion). This is in line with responses provided as part of a national study into career motivations in UK HE, which concluded that professional staff are likely to join the sector for practical reasons (for

example, because they were ‘offered a job’ or because of the ‘friendly work environment’ and ‘career security’; Barot & Riley, 2010: 13).

A minor yet interesting pattern is co-constructed by participants mentioning some clearly gendered expectations of what their colleagues in university admin would be like. For example, M5 talks about ‘the ladies in the office’ when she was a student, M12 about ‘middle-aged women’ chatting and having tea, and James about ‘women in their sort of late thirties to forties who [...] didn’t have such great career aspirations’ (FG1) when recalling his experience as a university student. The alleged lack of career aspirations of lower-level university administrators is frequently mentioned in the data set as a source of embarrassment in social situations (cf. 6.3); that this lack of ambition is often discursively gendered is further discussed in Chapter 9.

Being a university administrator may be interpreted as a sign of lack of career aspirations precisely because university administration is consistently talked about as a job, not a career:

L3: I've never.. been one of these people that's always.. known what they wanna do you know.. [...] so I suppose that's how.. I've ended up in this sort of.. office inertia.. which has <@continued@> really... but also [...] working here was always kind of... -- I always felt it was my day job.. but my actual.. my real interest.. lies in other.. pursuits

James: No matter slightly contradictory.. even though I can't say I chose to join a university.. part of the reason for doing it was in all honesty just because I thought it'd probably be quite quiet.. and that I could work out... <@what was my true calling@> and then=

All: =@

James: <@and then 6 years later [.. I'm still there!@>]

Gabby: [Maybe you've] found your true calling! @
(FG1)

Both L3 and James talk about their first jobs in HEA as a stopgap, not their ‘true calling’ (interestingly, my comment at the end of the FG1 extract is not picked up by any of the participants). For them as well as others (e.g. L7, M13), university admin is reportedly a temporary occupation while figuring out what “proper” career to pursue. At times a job in HEA is talked about as a springboard to something else, mainly an academic career (e.g. Jodie, FG3; Nikki, FG7; Rob, FG1). These participants’ accounts echo the cover stories told by Henson and Rogers’ (2001) male clerical temp workers, which ‘invoke[...] an alternative identity and define[...] one as truly temporary or occupationally transient’, and ‘provide an explanation of their apparent lack of drive or competence in obtaining a real (male) job’ (2001: 232). The gendered devaluation of university admin work is explored in Chapter 9. Here, it is important to

point out that, vis-à-vis the dominant discourse of devaluation of admin work, these participants' accounts may indeed be interpreted as "cover stories" (also cf. 6.3).

Temporary work is recurrently mentioned as the 'way into' university admin:

I was temping.. I had no interest to stay on.. I was gonna go and do something else.. I didn't really know what I was gonna do cos I was [*young*].. didn't go to university.. so I was just looking for money really (M13)

Participants who talk about their first job in HEA as a stopgap also tend to talk about "getting stuck" in it:

When I came out of university I was still in retail and I thought "oh my goodness how am I going to get out of this".. and.. I joined a recruitment agency [...] and.. this was my third.. job within office support.. so I came here.. with the thing in mind that you know.. I'm not gonna spend time here I'm not gonna spend long I wanna be leaving soon just give me a couple of months.. <@four years down the line@> and I'm still here! @ (Aba, FG9)

Although many entered HEA with little intention of remaining, some participants talk about *choosing to stay* in this 'nice', 'good' job:

I got in through a temp job.. and I quite liked the work-life balance... so continued in that line (Rob, FG1)

I've had a few conversations with people about it... and... they choose it when they're in the job.. so I chose it when I got into it and I realised I could do it and I liked it and liked the work that's when I chose it I didn't choose it as a.. career.. goal or anything like that.. I was just like ... it's a good job.. I like it.. I'm getting paid.. it's nice.. 9 to 5.. suits me.. so I wanted to stick to it (M13)

What M13 means when she mentions 'liking the work' is discussed later in this section. Amongst the perks of working in HEA cited by participants as making them decide to stay in HEA is the intellectually stimulating environment, where 'there's always something going on' (Kat, FG2), participation in sports and lectures is encouraged (Rob, FG1), and you can have interesting chats with academics (e.g. Bev, FG5; M4).

Another positive²⁹ mentioned by participants is linked to the "edifying" experience of supporting and helping students, often framed in terms reminiscent of parenting:

I don't wanna say I baby them... but... when they first meet me I... try to have that sort of friendly approach with them [...] because I... start off with the.. new intake and I am able to still go to the graduation ceremony.. to see how many..

²⁹ Another pattern in participants' talk about what they like about their job is variety. As this is part of a counter-discourse about university admin, it is explored in more detail in 6.5.

actually.... did the journey [...] it's nice.. it's nice to see them walk up in gowns and that I could be part of that (Andrea, FG4)

Dealing with students you get to know them for years and you build.. a personal kind of relationship [...] they do bring a certain type of.. -- family type of culture here (Majid, FG8)

The discursive construction of university admin as caring work (and, as such, as gendered work) is further discussed in Chapter 8. In addition to this language of caring and parenting, participants also cite the constant contact with young students from all over the world as making HE a dynamic work environment – especially when compared to the private, corporate sector, where everybody is in ‘grey suit’ (Yokow, FG5).

The afore-mentioned binary opposition between HE as public vs. the private sector is a consistent trope across the data sets³⁰:

I like the... academic... environment... I think it's more kind of holistic than if you worked in a bank or something [...] I've worked.. in the private sector.. and [...] I find that most people here are... culturally-aware and I much prefer that (Kat, FG2)

This binary opposition provides participants with the linguistic resources to articulate other perks of working in HEA. For example, public sector workers, and therefore university administrators, are spoken of as supportive colleagues:

Natalie: I expected my colleagues to be friendly.. I find that in the public sector [...] I think everyone's in it for the right reasons?

Peter: There doesn't seem to be much competition.. you know in the private sector there's a lot more competition for posts... trying to outdo each other and [...] it's all about you and what you can get and how far you can go.. whereas in the public sector [...] at times when you are that hectically busy [...] people will... drop whatever they're doing and come over to help

Natalie: I'd agree because... admin jobs are quite similar I find.. across the board but... it's... who you're with that makes your job more enjoyable? [...] coz.. you could be doing the same job but.. if you're surrounded by people that.. aren't like you said.. supportive and friendly [...] you wouldn't want to go into work and wouldn't enjoy... your job as much so I would agree actually.. the people.. make it what it is

(FG3)

What makes university admin work enjoyable are the people, i.e. the colleagues (or the students); if it was just for the job, ‘you wouldn’t want to go into work’. There

³⁰ In all but one focus group, not coincidentally the one conducted at the Business School.

appears to be very little about the work itself that is worth talking about as making administrators 'rush[...] out of bed every day' (Victoria, FG4).

Another perk cited by participants, again linked to HE being considered part of the public sector, is work-life balance and flexibility:

Gabby: What's the best thing about your job.. if you could only say one thing=
Bev: =5 o'clock @
(FG5)

Jack: Work-life balance [...]
Calvin: Yeah I was gonna say... my social life...both... with people in the university and... outside cos I mean... if you're on top of your work.. you leave at 5... and it's great! You get tables at busy restaurants... <@loads of seats in the pub!@> or <@you're home before 6!@>
(FG1)

Camille: I would say the flexibility of the job... I find that compared to private sector... if you need to come in at 9:30 and you have a valid reason... especially when you have family commitments... it's a bit practical maybe.. but... it makes a big difference as well in the... life.. work balance
(FG3)

At this stage of the FGs, talk about flexibility and work-life balance does not occasion any explicit "gender talk" (except, perhaps, for Camille's quote above). On the other hand, the discursive work done by participants to construct HEA not only as a supportive and friendly, but also as a not-too-stressful, relatively flexible and stable work environment sets the scene for the explicit gender talk occasioned later on in the groups and interviews (cf. Chapter 10 for further discussion).

Discourse analysis involves thinking about what is said as well as what is *not* said, but *could have been said*, i.e. about absence as well as presence. Not only do participants not mention choosing to work in HEA³¹; they also tend to strongly deny that working in HEA could possibly be anyone's choice or conscious decision:

It was not my choice.. at all (Monica, FG7)

At 18 I didn't think I wanted to work in higher education.. it's been an evolution... (1.5) here I am @ going backwards.. regressing @ (Bev, FG5)

I think it's more circumstances.. you end up rather than actually making a definite decision to get into higher education (Jack, FG1)

I fell into it.. and I think.. a lot of people fall into university administration.. I don't think anyone chooses to be a university administrator.. and if anyone says they did <@they're liars!@> (M13)

³¹ Except for, perhaps, M1. M3 states that she made a conscious decision to enter HEA after 'falling into it' by temping.

The tendency to ‘fall into’ – rather than choosing to work in – HEA might well be the consequence of it not being a well-known occupation, or a recognised profession. On the other hand, when considering participants’ patterned accounts critically and in terms of their functions – what they “do” – and implications, a specific image of university admin is co-constructed: a job (not a career) that nobody could ever possibly choose; that people reportedly fall into, then get stuck in, or end up staying in because they enjoy remotely work-related aspects such as work-life balance and having supportive colleagues. Later on in her interview, M13 qualifies her previous statement about ‘liking the work’, by stating: ‘the admin side of things... I really enjoy... (1) <@sadly@>. Enjoying what is devalued as boring, easy, mundane admin work is ‘sad’, or, as L1 puts it, ‘not cool [...] you just sound a bit uptight.. and boring’.

In line with Gill’s notion of ‘critical respect’ (2007b; cf. 4.1.1), the aim here is not to contest the fact that participants might “actually” have fallen into university admin. Rather, it is argued that the dominant societal and sectorial devaluation of (university) admin work provides participants with restrictive subject positions and limited discursive options to talk about how they entered the sector, what they like about their job, and why they ended up staying: it limits what *can* be said about such work without consequences. Put differently, if ‘nobody likes boring admin’ (M11), and working in university admin is constructed as regressing rather than evolving³² (Bev, FG5), then those who may talk about liking it, choosing to do it, or even just about doing it for a living, do so at their own risk: the risk of being judged as ‘uncool’, boring individuals, who lack career drive and ambition.

6.3. The embarrassment of being *just* a university administrator

This section explores patterns in how FG participants reportedly talk about their job in social situations³³, with a particular focus on how they come to terms with the dominant discursive devaluation of (university) admin work.

When asked what their job is about, some participants report mentioning their job title or explaining the tasks their job involves. Others demonstrate and/or report some degree of reluctance, and at times an urge to change the topic of conversation:

Bev: I tend to revert to... what I used to do which is academic administrator.. coz that’s sort of.. what I was when I was working at

³² I once received a Senior Lecturer’s congratulations upon what they defined as my ‘career progression’ from university administrator to PhD student.

³³ Cf. Table 2, p.75, Q1.

a higher level [...] and.. leave it at that and nobody asks any questions @

Francesca: [...]
I usually say I work for a [*subject*] department.. and it doesn't really invite any more questions so that's quite similar to you [...]

Gabby: You've all got very successful one-liners

All: @

Yokow: @

All: Yeah... I live it 40 hours a week I don't wanna talk about it after work @

(FG5)

Rachel: I just say university administrator and then I just say paperwork.. and then I usually don't get anything back

All: @

Rachel: @

All: So I just end the conversation

Rachel: @

But if I talk about anything at all I talk about.. the academics and the students on the programmes? so it's more to do with... the teaching. you know.. just my experience of those kind of people rather than.. what I do I guess

(FG6)

Pam: I actually just say administrator and then quickly change the subject=

All: =@

(FG9)

In FG participants' accounts of social situations, they appear reluctant to elaborate on what they do, do not offer detail unless people specifically ask them questions (e.g. Peter, FG3), which reportedly hardly ever happens, or attempt to move the conversation on as soon as possible. The reluctance seems to be both on the part of the administrators and of their interlocutors. A strategy participants deploy involves steering the conversation towards something or someone else. In the extracts above, Rachel talks about the teaching (i.e. academics and students), Bev talks about a higher-level job she used to have, and Francesca talks about working for the department. Administrators seem not to be particularly eager to talk about what they do (cf. Yokow's comment, which effectively prompts me to move the discussion on).

Another strategy participants reportedly deploy in social situations consists of "hyping it up":

James: I sometimes say things like I... deal with things such as student visas coz it sounds a little bit more... [*impressive*]

All: [@]

(FG1)

Nick: I will refer to some of the slightly more interesting things - coz a lot of what we're doing is sort of you know.. moving data around and I do some student finance stuff and we do all these reference requests... but somehow the graduation ceremony is a bit more. glamorous as it were [...] maybe glamorous is the wrong word but it's... one of the sort of more.. stand-out things that you do in terms of the job

(FG6)

Participants also mention 'playing it down':

Majid: With me I kind of.. don't say I'm just an [*job title*] or just a [*job title*]... because my role just touches on various aspects [...] so if I was to describe that.. it gets kind of confusing for others to understand.. so I keep it.. as small as I can
(FG8)

Stacey: ... (2) [*blushes*] I play it down.. or... do I play it down... I... I just.. "I'm just a secretary".. that's been my standard.. line for.. ever.. and I know there aren't secretaries now are there.. they're administrators... but.. yeah I've always been slightly.. don't know I just.. didn't ever want to make anything of it when it isn't... so just a secretary and nobody asks any more

All: @

Yokow: That's the whole point isn't it?

All: @

Stacey: Otherwise what d'you say you know.. "I.. find the keys and I type!"

All: @

(FG5)

'Traces' (Sunderland, 2004) of a dominant discourse of devaluation can be spotted in the extracts above, e.g. the frequent use of '*just*' before job titles, the opposition between the bulk of university admin work ('moving data around', 'writing references', 'find[ing] the keys and typ[ing]' etc.), which remains untold, and its more 'interesting', 'impressive', and 'glamorous' aspects, worth telling people about. Being *just* a university administrator is somehow undesirable and not worth telling people, as people will not want to hear about it.

Opposite though they might seem at first, 'hying it up' and 'playing it down' are arguably two strategies deployed by participants to discursively negotiate and come to terms with the dominant devaluation of their work. By deploying these two strategies however, participants end up recycling the dominant discourse of devaluation which eventually silences them: either because 'nobody asks any more' or because they 'quickly change the subject'. The dominant discursive devaluation of university admin itself is not contested, only temporarily circumvented and eventually upheld: being a university administrator is still something 'not to be proud of' (cf. 6.1 and below), hence the need to 'hype it up' or 'play it down' in order to quickly move the conversation on.

The following extracts suggest that silencing is indeed one of the detrimental material consequences of the dominant discursive devaluation of university admin work (cf. 6.4 and Chapter 7 for a discussion of other material consequences):

Aba: If you say administration.. sometimes they don't really want to find out any more details.. "oh it's admin.. office work" [*derogatory tone*] and that's it [...]

Mel: I think you're right when you say admin they're like.. "oh.. admin.." and sometimes I kind of feel like I don't wanna say admin cos=

Aba: =yeah=

Mel: =then people will kind of think... "oh.. admin" [*snobbish tone*]

Aba: @ yeah..

Vanessa: They just think it's like.. data entry or something

Mel: Yeah and it's not. like that.. at all

Aba: It's more than -- far more than that

Mel: Yeah.. it depends who I'm with - sometimes I'll.. hype it up a bit

All: @

(FG9)

James: I think... with me in all honesty... I sometimes try and avoid the word administrator..

Calvin: Hm mm=

James: =because there's that thing that... as soon as you tell someone that effectively.. you work in admin.. I think their eyes just glaze over a little bit.. so I think what I tend to do is... maybe not give a job title.. <@maybe give a clue something like@> "I kind of work in... higher education" then say what the job entails a little bit

Rob: I agree

(FG1)

It is other people's linguistic and para-linguistic reactions (e.g. derogatory tone, eyes glazing over, etc.) upon hearing the words admin/administrator that reportedly make participants feel embarrassed about being *just* university administrators, to the point of not wanting to say it (e.g. Mel, FG9), or not saying it altogether (e.g. James, FG1).

As eloquently articulated by L3 in the extract below, the devaluation of university admin work carries with it a negative evaluation of the people who do it for a living:

It's.. a question that I dread.. in any social situation.. and I often try and... wonder why that is and I think it's basically cos I'm slightly embarrassed.. about my.. job? [...] I always feel that.. perhaps.. it's slightly dull and.. that.. it's quite difficult to sort of make it sound anything other than.. dull.. so I suppose... what would I normally say.. I'd normally just.. play it down really.. and almost try and change the conversation.. yeah "I work as an administrator at a university".. without going into any detail.. and then.. I'd probably try and... tell.. that person about.. other stuff that I do.. like.. cos I do a lot of volunteering work outside of my.. normal job [...] I feel slightly embarrassed... that I'm doing something that.. you know that... no-one would ever.. -- could ever possibly really.. -- well maybe somebody.. is interested in it but you know.. I just feel like it's... the kind of occupation that.. is seen.. as... (1) like.. fairly dull.. because.. in the most part it is kind of office administrative work I suppose [...] I feel like.. it's perceived... -- other people could perceive it to be a job that that somebody does who lacks ambition perhaps.. or lacks any kind of... sort of.. intellectual vigour or kind of... (1) motivation I suppose.. and I.. you know I'm not that kind of person [...] There is.. a perception that it's... dull.. slightly dull and uninteresting and... (1) something that you can't really take.. that much pride in... doing perhaps [...] and then I.. find it impossible to.. try and [...] *hide* how much I don't.. want to be doing this job.. I suppose I can't.. really cover it up and then.. it makes me uncomfortable and I see that somebody else is clearly.. not gonna be interested and wanting to hear about it as much... so I'm not gonna be interested and wanting to talk about it @ (L3)

L3 reports being 'slightly embarrassed' about his job because it is 'pretty boring', 'dull', 'not intellectually challenging', and 'anyone could do it'. On the other hand, his embarrassment appears to stem from how his job is perceived by others, how it 'sounds' to them: L3 concedes that 'that's not necessarily true' and might be a matter of perceptions more than 'reality'. He also mentions using some of the aforementioned strategies to come to terms with his feeling of embarrassment, e.g. using a 'cover story' and 'playing it down' in order to change the topic of conversation.

Ultimately, L3 appears to attribute his embarrassment to people's alleged judgement of him as someone doing such dull, menial, unimportant work, i.e. as someone who lacks motivation, intellectual vigour and ambition, and states that he is 'not that kind of person'. It is to counteract this judgement that he shifts the conversation to his activities outside work, which construct a different, more positive image of himself he seems to be more eager to talk about, because his interlocutor is going to be more interested in hearing about it. In doing so, he upholds the dominant discursive devaluation of university admin as work that 'anyone can do' but 'no-one would ever.. could ever possibly really.. [be interested in]; 'something that you can't really take that much pride... in doing'³⁴.

L3's account is another example of how the dominant discursive devaluation of (university) admin work provides those who do such work with very restrictive and arguably undesirable subject positions. Participants recycling this discourse collude with the construction of their work as dull, mundane, easy and unimportant, in their attempt to avoid being judged, as L3 puts it, as lacking ambition, motivation, and intellectual vigour, as a 'bit uptight and boring' (L1).

Eveline suggests that there are four dimensions through which the devaluing of 'ivory basement' work occurs:

- *physical spaces provided for general staff;*
- *responsibilities of general staff and crediting of expertise;*
- *relative lack of encouragement for staff development opportunities;*
- *relative lack of career opportunities (Eveline, 2004: 143)*

The first two dimensions are considered in the next subsection; the third and fourth in Chapter 7.

³⁴ At roughly the same time as this study's data collection, CSU launched a campaign aimed at celebrating the achievements of female PS staff *outside* the workplace. This campaign was run alongside another campaign to celebrate the academic (i.e. work-related) achievements of female academic staff, suggesting that, unlike those of academic staff, the work-related achievements of "non-academic" staff may not be "glamorous" or "important" enough to be worth celebrating publicly, or being proud of.

6.4. Being 'at the beck and call', being 'a forgotten cog'

FG participants recurrently talk about lack of control over their time and space, and about being 'at the beck and call' (James, FG1) of students and managers/academic staff:

The most challenging thing for me is.. just organising your time [...] something comes out of the blue.. and that's it.. you've got to put everything back (Anna, FG2)

One person will ask you to do one thing but might not necessarily have spoken to your.. direct line-manager.. who then says "why are you doing that?".. "well so and so told me to do that".... that sideways communication sometimes... results in you doing something not doing it doing it not doing it... (HHH) just.. somebody.. tell me.. the right thing to do! (Bev, FG5)

A lot of the time there's this "oh well... just dump this on the administrator they'll get it done" as opposed to thinking.. 'is this a good use of the administrator's time' (L6)

Lower-level administrators (and their line-managers) are increasingly often located in open-plan offices, and most have front-line duties or are required to cover those on a rota. Generally speaking, they need to be available and at their desk from 9am to 5pm, and have very limited, if any, access to flexible or home-working due to the front-line nature of their role and the 'needs of the business' (Eveline, 2004; Tong, 2014; ECU, 2014b).

Some participants explicitly link their being 'at the beck and call' to their subordinate position and the devaluation of their work:

Jasmin: I think managing some people's expectations of what we actually do? There are always the odd... people that come along with... a request... let's say

All: @

Jasmin: <@for something to be done@> ... that you know that... you shouldn't be doing or... you don't have the time to even entertain but... the expectation that people have of.. particularly us [*job title*] is that... we will just do it.. that we're there to just... do whatever we're told [...] there's a few people about that... don't know what we do... and why we're doing it [...]

Andrea: We're sort of at the bottom of the food chain so..

Joan: So if you don't know who to ask... then ask the [*job title*]!

Jasmin: I think they forget sometimes that actually we have... jobs ourselves.. and we can't just drop everything.. to be able to... help that particular person at the time?

(FG4)

Priya: A lot of them think just because we're administration we can drop everything at a.. drop of a hat.. so they'll come up to us and they'll say.. "I want this done" [...] sometimes you do have to be.. a little bit firm.. cos they think because you are an administrator.. you'll do.. -- you'll just drop everything

(FG7)

Due to their subordinate position in the hierarchy ('the bottom of the food chain'), and the construction of their work as easy, mundane and unimportant, administrators are expected to immediately drop anything they might be doing to do what "people" (i.e. managers, academics and students) request. "People" reportedly have certain expectations of administrators because, as Jasmin puts it, they 'forget sometimes that actually we have... jobs ourselves'. Being at the beck and call of others thus not only implies lack of authority and of ownership over one's own work, time and space, but also lack of crediting of expertise. As administrators are assumed to be there to do what they are told, i.e. to have an exclusively ancillary, support function, their work ends up being constructed as "non-work" (Eveline, 2004; Moodie, 1996).

Lacking authority reportedly has several material consequences on administrators' day-to-day working lives. For example, participants argue that 'being expected to do things but not having the power' (Efie, FG7) hinders their ability to do their job well, and results in them being held accountable for issues beyond their control:

I think maybe because we are so often in the firing line between either the students <@or the academics@>.. people love to blame us for things! [...] you name it.. "it's admin's fault" @... a lot of the time we're waiting on people to give us something or to do something.. and the students because we're the ones they know they'll be like "where is this where is this where is this!" and you're like "it's down the pipeline I can't change it" @... but because I'm the first port of call for my students... I end up taking a lot of the sort of -- if they're frustrated about something.. they vent that to me (Nikki, FG7)

Participants mention the need to have a 'thick skin' (e.g. Joan, FG4) to be able to deal with 'the angry academic' (Bev, FG5, cf. below for further discussion), 'irate vendors.. shouting at you down the phone' (Priya, FG7); students being 'horrid' (Jasmin, FG4), 'frustrated' (Aba, FG9) and 'aggressive' (Vanessa, FG9); generally speaking, 'angry', 'difficult', 'annoyed' people (Nick, FG6). Administrators' position is described as 'front-line' and 'on the firing-line': these war metaphors establish a comparison between administrators and privates, used as gatekeepers on the front-line to protect more senior staff, whilst simultaneously describing administrators' "customer service" tasks as dealing with belligerent, conflict situations.

Participants often talk about what has been defined as 'the faculty / staff divide' (Losinger, 2015), the 'iron curtain' (Eveline, 2004), the 'caste ceiling' (Krug, 2015), the 'them and us' divide in HE (Dobson and Conway, 2003). They do so by defining their own work as 'everything that the academics don't do' (Nikki, FG7), or will not do:

You have to be a bit laid back as well... coz you can get a bit overwhelmed if not.. particularly working with academics.. they tend to do what they're told... most of

the time @ unless they think they're above admin things.. which is a bit... strange (Jack, FG1)

Feeling 'above admin things' implies a devaluation of admin work and a hierarchical relationship between academic work, happening in the "limelight", and admin work, non-work happening in the background – and therefore also between academics and administrators (cf. Chapter 2). This institutionalised hierarchical positioning of work and workers is what seems to legitimise the behaviour of the afore-mentioned 'angry academic', who says 'horrible things' and is 'really really rude to you' (Nikki, FG7):

Sometimes when.. the academics -- they're obviously busy people too and sometimes they're.. demanding -- the way you're spoken to.. it's just..-- you have to.. not take it personally.. it's just that... they want something done and.. it @ needs to get done.. @ (Laura, FG8)

In FG6, participants appear to echo Houck's (1990) description of HE as a feudal society (cf. Chapter 2):

Rachel: Academics can be... -- that's totally variable isn't it but.. in this environment you can get people who think a lot of themselves because they're highly qualified.. professors or whatever and it can be hard to.. talk to them as equals... you might go in saying we're equals.. I'm doing this you're doing that we'll work together but.. a lot of people are stuck on the hierarchy thing..
[...]

Andy: I do find.. some of the academics I work with.. can be quite... awkward and think that... you're just there to be their.. servant.. and do.. as you're told and.. I've got good work relationships with most of the academics but there are a few who are.. a bit off-ish yeah.. or not very professional I would say [...] there are people that talk down to you as if they knew more [...]

Beck: It's our culture it's the old-school culture.. that seems to have.. survived external forces and.. have kept its bizarre.. hierarchy [...] and this hasn't changed even though.. the administration surrounding it has changed quite a lot

(FG6)

Ultimately, this unequal relationship, sustained by the hierarchical, old-school culture in HE, is based on the assumption that administrators do easy, mundane, cushy, unimportant work, work that is not intellectually challenging, and are therefore not fully part of academia:

I find some of the attitudes to administrators quite frustrating... that idea that we aren't as intelligent.. the fact that we don't have a PhD.. means that we aren't worth listening to [...] sometimes.. there's this impression that "oh it will all go over their heads anyway".. but it doesn't matter! sometimes.. actually just by saying.. "you would be welcome to come along to our.. talks... (1) you'll understand some of the diagrams or you won't but do you wanna come?"... just that (L6)

In the 1990s, university admin staff were defined as ‘servants in a Victorian household’ (Kelly and Leicester, 1996: 108), ‘treated in an almost feudal manner’ (Castleman and Allen, 1995: 69). Over a decade later, they were still described as ‘second-class “support staff” citizens’ ‘relegated to the ‘periphery’ of HE (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009: 157). FG participants (similarly to Tong’s (2014) respondents) report being treated differently from other staff in several ways (e.g. access to flexible/home-working, furnished breakout/office spaces, training, development and promotion/progression opportunities, cf. Chapter 7).

It is not only in relation to academic staff that administrators lament their lack of authority and invisibility:

What makes a good senior manager... is engaging more.. with the sort of.. lowly.. or whatever better words.. members of staff.. and actually knowing what people are doing.. rather than.. going about your business.. without ever.. taking an interest in what is the... bread and butter work that... is keeping the wheels turning.. I've definitely seen a lot of that.. you get this kind of like.. fissure.. between.. senior.. management.. and the.. what do you call it sort of.. standard administration.. you know people at the bottom of the.. ladder (L3)

When talking about their relationship with senior management, FG2 participants use a very powerful metaphor to convey administrators’ invisibility and second-class citizen status:

Kat: Higher management.. some decisions that are made way above you... are just not practical for your day-to-day running of your job
 Samya: Yeah I think you do feel like a cog... in a machine quite a lot of the time
 Amala: A forgotten cog!
 Samya: [...] and it does feel like.. you know.. you're only noticed when things go wrong
 (FG2)

Vanessa: [*Managers*] have just like.. a certain idea of where they want you to go without actually consulting you on what you wanna do [...] in my case] they were like.. “you:... are gonna be:... a [*job title*]!” but they never asked me.. “would you want to be a [*job title*].. or would you wanna do something else”
 (FG9)

Despite being essential to the functioning of the HE machine, each administrator is only one cog out of many, and their repetitive work is only ever noticed when there is a malfunction, i.e. “things go wrong”. Administrators-as-cogs are forgotten, and the implications of decisions made above them, including those affecting their day-to-day work or career trajectories, are not considered by senior management, participants argue: it is as though they were considered interchangeable.

Administrators are indeed often considered as interchangeable (a point also made by Pearson, 2008). In FG7, Nikki discusses the standardisation of job descriptions that occurred approximately at the same time as this study's FG data collection, and was one of the outcomes of restructuring:

They basically said the [*job title*] role is now.. the same across the entire university regardless of department.. so feasibly you could be moved from one department to another and expected to have the same job description.. but the amount of specialist knowledge I have to have about [*name of discipline*] for my job is incredibly -- I mean I have so much specialist knowledge about becoming a [*name of profession*...] I wouldn't very easily be able to suddenly do that in a different school.. There's a lot of knowledge that we have as administrators that people think we don't have (Nikki, FG7)

Participants also talk about not being able to take credit for achievements, especially when these are considered above their grade:

Leadership.. and things.. although you are really doing it in ways.. [...] in my administration experience you would never be... credited with that (Natalie, FG3)

You do certain.. high-level stuff.. but you're still a grade 5.. (Yokow, FG5)

A real challenge.. from a grade 5 level.. is trying to inspire others to change how things are and... they don't always accept that from a grade 5 (Rachel, FG6)

Administrators doing devalued work find it hard to have their contributions 'accepted' or recognised, and receive or claim credit for them. Their subordinate, ancillary position means that their work is subsumed into those of others, managers and academics (Pearson, 2008). Doing devalued work has the effect of 'pigeonholing' (Amala, FG2) the people who do it, to the extent that their skills are not tapped into, their acts of 'ivory basement leadership' (Eveline, 2004) are not acknowledged or rewarded.

The invisibility of university admin workers, or their being 'a forgotten cog' (Amala, FG2) has far-reaching material consequences:

Camille: I must say that when I first came to CSU.. I was quite shocked by the very little training offered to professional staff [...] shocked because we are in a university we are in a teaching centre..

Natalie: A learning environment yeah

Jodie: Ha the irony!

All: @

Peter: Oh but.. it is so true!

Camille: Which for me shows.. what this vision of I don't know who.. at the top... of what we bring to the.. professional services... We are invisible I think

All: (3)

Gabby: [*awkwardly*] erm...

All: @

Peter: No it's true!

(FG3)

Chapter 7 explores the lack of development and progression opportunities reported by FG participants as a material consequence of the devaluation of admin work and those who do it. The next section instead explores how participants contest the dominant discursive devaluation of their work.

6.5. Contesting the discursive devaluation of university admin

Variety is the only strictly work-related aspect participants report liking about their job, thus contesting its construction as boring, dull and repetitive:

No one day is the same (Laura, FG8)

It's not a boring job.. things are always changing... there is always an opportunity to learn about something different (Beck, FG6)

Often, talk about “what university admin is actually about” is articulated in opposition to previous expectations of easy, mundane, dull, routine, unimportant and cushy work:

I didn't think it'd be.. as complex and as... vast as it is [...] I thought it was gonna be.. a regular secretarial job.. well it's not at all (Martina, FG8)

I didn't think it was.. a particularly important job.. I never knew any of my administrators at university so... I just thought.. they're just there! <@they just do the job@>... but I was <@very wrong... we work hard!@> (M12)

I thought.. it would be a lot less stressful... [...] I viewed it as a bit more.. mundane? [...] I didn't think it was gonna be that creative and I didn't realise how much of an impact I could make (L6)

Stress and hectic times in the academic cycle are also regularly mentioned, which counteracts the construction of university admin as cushy work and of administrators as not working very hard:

During those periods we're.. massively inundated with phone calls and emails and so on [...] and you just have to really.. get on with it.. you don't really have a spare moment you're just constantly -- as soon as you're off the phone go and do something else (Nick, FG6)

You have to be able to hold about.. five or six different priorities in your mind at the same time.. and you have to be willing to restructure those priorities really quickly when something else comes along.. and so that sort of style of working can lend itself to getting really sort of.. panicked and.. stressed (Nikki, FG7)

Administrators discursively construct themselves as passionate, hardworking individuals with strong analytical skills, willing to go above and beyond their duties, make executive decisions and use their in-depth knowledge to tweak the rules slightly and help individuals (e.g. James, FG1, Rachel, FG6, Martina, FG8).

These competing accounts of university admin work and workers convey a sense of agency, importance and authority, which is at odds with administrators' dominant discursive construction as 'envelope stuffers' (Katerina, FG2), 'jobsworthy pencil pushing all-talk' people' (Nikki, FG7). In FG3 for example, Jodie compares administrators to magicians:

Peter: If you think about it.. we have no authority...
Jodie: But.. we're like.. the most impo:rtant people... don't you know..
 everyone [wants to keep you sweet because]
Peter: [don't go on the bad side of him!]
Jodie: You're the one who.. makes the magic.. magical things happen
All: [@]
Jodie: [they don't know how] to do

(FG3)

Magic often involves making things or people appear or disappear, and its tricks are meant to be invisible. Administrators thus possess some sort of invisible power, which goes unrecognised as, officially, they 'have no authority'. This sort of hidden, alternative form of power echoes what Eveline (2004) describes as 'ivory basement leadership': relational leadership, 'glue work' which holds the organisation together. Although, as Nikki puts it, 'the place wouldn't run without it' (FG7), it goes unnoticed and unrewarded.

Creativity is another consistently mentioned aspect of admin work which contests its dominant devaluation as dull and repetitive:

We've also gotta be quite... creative.. coz you really just get the most biza:rre queries and questions sometimes.. things you've ne:ver heard of.. every year.. without fail (Victoria, FG4)

Being also creative in the sense of trying to get people on board... because you're having to actually get them... to actually follow something or to.. give you that information [...] do something that they might not want to do [...] being able to influence but without the authority (Peter, FG3)

Peter makes sense of creativity as an act of ivory basement leadership: how to influence others when lacking the authority to do so. These hidden acts of leadership are relegated to the 'ivory basement' not simply because of administrators' subordinate position in ivory tower: they are kept there by the dominant discursive devaluation of admin work.

A noticeable tendency, across both data sets, is the discursive construction of the "bad administrator", onto whom the dominant devaluation of admin work and workers can be projected and thus negotiated. The "bad administrator" is talked about as the colleague who is there just for the sake of having a permanent job, and never

gets back to you, until things disappear into a void (FG6). It is the colleague who is always busy on social media, or gossiping about others, and who makes up forms and procedures just to keep other people on their toes; the colleague who leaves at five on the dot, even when they are halfway through writing an email, and refuses to help if a task falls halfway outside their job description (FG5). It is the 'lifer', the colleague who has been working in the role for twenty years with no aspiration to go anywhere (FG1; FG4) and is stuck in their ways because they can get away with it (FG5; also cf. Chapters 8 & 9 for further discussion of men as "bad administrators").

This "bad administrator" is blamed for university administrators' "bad reputation":

There's quite a stigma across.. higher education.. on administrators.. for being particularly lazy and actually not doing their job.. and it makes people like me.. very angry.. because no I have seen it [...] there are incredibly a lot of.. lazy people.. that I work with.. that just simply do not do their job.. [...] so I do understand why the stigma can be there? but.. it's a shame because there are people that actually really do care about the environment that they work in? .. and.. could.. actually give higher education.. administration a better name if.. they were taken into account (L4)

As L4 puts it, "good" administrators are 'not taken into account': the dominant discourse within (and beyond) higher education is about the "bad/lazy administrator". This might account for the shift in L6's self-definition from administrator to manager, despite initially contesting the 'underestimation' of administrators:

When somebody meets me I'll say I'm an administrator.. to say I'm a manager would feel too diffuse and it would also.. make me feel as if.. the fact that I'm line-managing someone? ... was more important [...] There.. is a contempt.. [...] an underestimation of what administrator means? [...] to me <@administration is the bomb@> we're the people who get things done.. who make things easier for other people.. who will slog through and make sure.. it's alright on the night... at the same time... (1) I do consider myself to be a manager because... (1) -- and a thing I noticed about myself that is different from say... people who aspire to be managers or people... who complain about managers is that... (1) when there's a problem or when I see an opportunity.. or an issue arising or a decision that needs making.. I'm the one who gets on and does it... but.. what I've noticed is that there are some people... who are very much.. pure administrators who wouldn't dream of.. piping up [...] there can be people who just.. they've got their role? they've got their remit.. and that's what they'll stay in (L6)

The discursive devaluation of university admin work and workers is so dominant in UK HE to the extent that it becomes hard, even for those who openly contest it, to re-appropriate and revalue the term administrator. In L6's quote, 'pure administrators' still end up being constructed, and devalued, as 'routine clerical' workers (Whitchurch, 2004a: 282).

Contesting the dominant discursive devaluation of university admin work(ers) has potentially emancipatory effects: as argued in Chapter 2, devaluation is at the basis of the neglect of this staff group, and of the gender imbalance in these roles. However, this counter-discourse needs to be made more visible and audible. Traces of it can be spotted in the handful of articles and books published on the subject (cf. 2.3, and in particular Eveline, 2004; Pearson 2008), a limited number of doctoral theses (e.g. Tong, 2004) and the very few blogs and comment pieces in publications such as the Times Higher Education (e.g. Atkinson, 2001; Butler, 2014). Further academic research is important, not least to challenge the ‘them and us’ divide between academics and “non-academics”, managers and administrators:

I really hope that your.. research.. does something.. about.. highlighting the work that grade 2s grade 3s and grade 4s do because I do think that we sort of get a rough deal.. (2) cos I think we are sort of like.. the forgotten ones... yet we're the ones that.. work the hardest and.. we have to be there for everyone so we have to be there for the academics and the students... and the other members of staff.. and.. everyone gives the credit to the 5s 6s and 7s... and it's like.. hang on! we're the ones that are here.. Monday to Friday.. 9 to 5 not allowed to work from home.. we don't get any advantages like that... any little... perks.. [...] people just forget the grade 3 level.. we're just sort of.. left to get on with it and the annoying thing is that we're the one-stop-shop for absolutely everything and you just sort of.. get left behind [...] so I do think it's really important.. that... you do this research (M12)

Equally fundamental is the role of managers – especially those who, like this study’s interviewees, progressed from clerical/administrative grades – in contesting such dominant devaluation of admin work on a day-to-day basis, if discursive change is to happen.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter explored the dominant discourse of devaluation of university admin work, recurrently drawn upon especially in the FG data set. It discussed data examples where university admin work is constructed as easy, boring, mundane, unimportant, routine, repetitive and cushy work. It also distinguished between instances where this discourse is drawn upon by participants to describe what “other people” think about their work, and when participants themselves collude with it and ultimately uphold it. It highlighted its common-sense, taken-for-granted nature, the limited linguistic resources and subject positions it provides participants with, and its detrimental effects and consequences.

This dominant discourse of devaluation was used as a framework to interpret participants’ reported embarrassment and reluctance to talk about what they do for a living in social situations, for fear of how others might judge them (cf. 6.3).

Participants' tendency to talk about falling into HEA, valuing aspects of their job which are not strictly work-related, using cover stories to depict themselves as 'occupationally transient' (Henson & Rogers, 2001: 232) as well as other strategies such as 'hyping it up' or 'playing it down', was also understood as a material consequence of the dominant societal and sectorial devaluation of admin work.

Very few administrators mention somewhat "gendered" reasons to enter HEA (related to motherhood and childcare, cf. 6.2; RQ1). The strongest pattern in both data sets is instead provided by (male and female) participants' talk about falling into HEA. This is in line with what other studies found (ECU, 2014b; Barot & Riley, 2010). On the other hand, Chapter 9 provides examples where the under-representation of men in university admin is accounted for in terms of them allegedly 'having a clearer vision of where they want to be' (M6) and going/being encouraged to 'go for bigger and better jobs' (e.g. M1, M13). Similarly, Chapter 10 discusses how the recurrent binary opposition between the private sector and HEA as part of the public sector – and, as such, constructed as work environment where colleagues are supportive and flexibility and work-life balance are encouraged – provides participants with the linguistic resources to account for the over-representation of women in lower-level generalist admin roles.

Drawing on Eveline's definition of the 'four dimensions through which the everyday devaluing of general staff work occurs' (2004: 143), Section 6.4 explored how university administrators talk about being 'at the beck and call' of academics, students and senior managers, and lament lack of control over their own time, space and workload. As the 'forgotten cog' of the HE machine, administrators reportedly have no authority, and their expertise and specialist knowledge go unnoticed and unrewarded. The next chapter explores the other two dimensions whereby university admin work is devalued: administrators' reported lack of career development and of progression opportunities.

Section 6.5 discussed how participants draw on a counter-discourse which is, implicitly or explicitly, articulated against the dominant discourse of devaluation. It argued that this counter-discourse has potentially emancipatory effects, but needs to be made more audible in order to promote discursive change (cf. Chapter 12).

Chapter 7. Discursive Constructions of (Lack of) Progression in HEA

The lack of development and progression opportunities for lower-level generalist administrators is a reoccurring theme in previous scholarship (cf. Chapter 2), and was therefore one of this study's discursive objects (cf. RQ2). Unsurprisingly, the most substantial pattern in the FG data set is provided by talk about getting stuck on G3 (cf. 7.1). Sub-section 7.1.1 explores how FG participants make sense of their lack of progression as the result of structural issues; 7.1.2 and 7.1.3 focus on how they construct it as the material consequence of the devaluation of their work. Section 7.2 looks at the competing patterns co-produced by managers when discussing their own and others' (lack of) progression.

7.1. Getting stuck on G3

Talk about getting stuck and not being able to develop or progress is a consistent pattern in all FGs bar one³⁵. The FG3 extract cited in 6.4 (cf. p.126) exemplifies how participants regularly make sense of the lack of institutional investment in their development as evidence of their invisibility, their "second-class citizen" status. The next sub-sections explore the specific patterned ways in which participants discuss their lack of development and progression opportunities and make sense of them as the material consequences of the devaluation of their work.

7.1.1. Lack of structure and/or career path

When talking about their lack of progression, FG participants tend to use passive or impersonal sentence constructions or an institutional 'they' or 'you', thus conveying powerlessness over their own career trajectory:

Yokow: There's no.. progression.. I mean there's.. no way...
Bev: No skill development really..
[...]
Bev: So the only way is out! [...] the only way is saying.. well I'm sorry but if there is nowhere to go.. and you won't allow me to develop anymore then that's it thank you

(FG5)

³⁵ This FG featured a combination of new staff and staff who had been working in the same role for many years; the School participants belonged to also had a reputation at CSU for being better resourced and was reportedly less impacted by the restructuring measures being introduced.

Gabby: [at the end of the job description task, cf. Table 2, p 75, Q6] How easy or difficult do you think it would be for you to get this job now
 All: @
 Pam: It would be an impossibility
 Aba: @ yeah
 Pam: Our staff development is... -- it's impossible for me to develop here.. [...]
 Aba: The problem in these sort of institutions is that they keep you at a stagnant kind of level.. and [...] you can't go up you just go along.. and that's it.. they don't give you the route to progress
 (FG9)

Kept stagnant, their progression institutionally hindered, administrators reportedly cannot move up, they can only 'move along' or get by; if they want to progress, 'the only way is out'. A similar account is provided by some (though not all, cf. 7.2.1) leavers who left CSU to progress:

It's hard to progress.. especially at CSU... when you're an administrator it's really hard to progress? ... because.. there aren't many grade 4 roles? which is one of the reasons why I left... there's no.. encouragement to go on courses.. or funding to go on courses.. or.. anything like that.. there's no... support mechanism in terms of developing your career (L7)

I realised.. it was time [to leave].. because.. there were people around me that were given.. this additional responsibility.. that just wasn't being provided for me.. and so.. I just realised.. it's not gonna be happening here.. I need to move on to do it.. elsewhere [...] you'd think they'd actually want to keep these people within the team.. and provide.. opportunities for those people.. but it was not the case.. it was only possible for.. maybe.. a couple of people but again.. it goes back to the whole.. favouritism thing (L4)

Favouritism is a minor yet significant pattern in FGs, and is also mentioned by managers³⁶:

It creates a bit of a culture.. and I think when you're a lower grade.. and if you've been a lower grade for... a period of time.. and you see that happening... and sometimes that overtakes you... wanting to progress... cos you.. automatically think 'well there's no point!' (M13)

The lack of a 'route to progress' (Aba, FG9) is at times articulated in opposition to the more linear promotion path available to academic staff (e.g. FG3), and made sense of as evidence that the contributions of "non-academic staff" are not as valued:

I remember in my induction a few years ago [...] the [Head of CSU] was talking about progression for academic staff.. and somebody asked "what about.. progression for administrative staff".. and he said.. "no.. we don't do any progression for professional staff.. it's only for academic staff".. and I thought.. why in hell do you say that.. to people who've just started in your university? you don't know their background.. you don't know their potential.. why would you suddenly.. limit.. all your pool of people (L1)

³⁶ Also cf. 7.2; cf. Chapter 9 for talk about gendered favouritism, e.g. the "boys' network".

Career progression for “non-academics” is about the position, not the person, and involves a ‘zero sum decision process’ (Looker, 1993: 39). PS staff are hardly ever “promoted”: if they wish to progress, they have to apply for a higher-grade position, as and when – and where – a suitable vacancy arises:

Priya: Especially in our department.. there's no real room for progression? It's a great department to work in.. and I've come to a point in my career as such that.. I would like to progress but.. there is no real room for progression.. so it would mean finding a new job.. or moving on to a different department.. and it's a shame really [...] because it's such a good place to work a lot of people in our department have been here for like 10 years 12 years..

All: Yeah

Priya: So.. that's... a good thing.. but that's an issue as well

Efie: Cos then you can't go anywhere... basically -- I'm not going anywhere that's it

(FG7)

At best, if their contribution is exceptional, PS staff can apply for regrading, a pay increment, or a one-off award but, as Tong (2014) among others points out, the system appears to be built to put staff off applying. Requests for regrading can also be rejected (e.g. L6), for example on the basis of budget constraints, and the candidate could even be demoted as a result of the regrading process.

The scarcity of G4 roles, either due to cuts or flatter management structures, is consistently cited as making G3 administrators’ chances to progress even slimmer:

Bev: There's nothing in between..

Yokow: Like a departmental manager for example.. other universities have it

Bev: We share between departments and end up doing a lot of low-level stuff which is fine [...] but there's nowhere for us to go!

(FG5)

Nikki: After the [*restructure*] there were a huge number of grade 3s created around the university.. very very very very few grade 4s.. and so it feels for someone at my level.. if I were intending to try to stay on.. within my team.. there is no grade 4s.. and then there's grade 5s who I don't think are going anywhere anytime soon so if I were trying to stay... I'd feel like.. I don't know how long it's gonna be before I could move... my immediate line manager she's gone up to grade 5 after being on grade 3 for I think like 5 years? So @ I think that is an issue that a lot of people are facing

(FG7)

As Victoria points out, using what she defines ‘a very sexist phrase’, ‘it’s dead man’s shoes’³⁷ (FG4). If they want to progress but stay in their team and department,

³⁷ This “sexist phrase” was added to the interview questioning routes for participants to comment upon.

administrators often have to wait for other people to leave. Although in the above FG5 excerpt participants appear to concur that the lack of career path/structure is a CSU-specific issue, the literature reviewed on PS staff, and lower-level administrators in particular (cf. Chapter 2), suggests this is a widespread issue for this staff group.

To solicit talk about career progression, FG participants were given a sample G4 job description built by using keywords, collocates and concordance line examples from the G4 sub-corpus of job descriptions (cf. Table 2, p. 75, Q6; Appendix C). Although virtually all participants claimed that they would be able to do or were already doing *parts* of the job, the prevalent tendency was to state that they would not get this job if they applied for it. First reactions upon reading the job description were mixed, ranging from laughter, silence, and talk about the ‘impossibility’ or ‘difficulty’ of getting a similar job at CSU. Slightly more optimistic answers were given, but represent a very weak tendency, often accompanied by a proviso along the lines of: ‘you would expect a bit of support or training’ (e.g. FG2, FG6).

At times, participants did not correctly identify the grade of the sample job description:

Gabby: How easy or difficult do you think it would be for you to get this job now
Yokow: At CSU?... never?... the structure is not in place.. basically from... my position=

Bev: =from grade 3? this is a grade issue I think probably more than anything isn't it.. whatever grade this job is this is quite likely to be a grade... 5 or 6.. I would have thought 6 probably
[...]

Yokow: There's a grade missing there's a step missing between this role.. and us

(FG5)

Calvin: And it feels like it's.. two grades.. you're jumping two grades.. that's potentially.. -- there's less chance of getting it cos it's.. such a leap... (1) even though like we're saying we probably do have.. enough experience to.. actually do a good job

James: If there'd be a grade on this it would be a grade 5.. so previously a grade 5 job was grade 4... and.. so therefore currently applying for a grade 4 job maybe didn't seem like.. so-such a leap as.. what is considered now

(FG1)

It could be argued that the reported scarcity of G4 roles might be influencing participants' grading of the sample job description. On the other hand, the corpus-based study flagged up a substantial “gap” in the language of a sample of G3 generalist and G4 job descriptions, (cf. Appendix Ciii; G3 generalist administrators as “keepers” and G4 role-holders as business “innovators/developers”) – a gap arguably bigger than an increase of just one grade would justify (cf. Calvin: ‘it feels like it's.. two

grades'). M10 suggests that when he progressed to G5 his role was 'very similar' to his previous G4 position:

That wasn't just the case for me that was the case for a lot of the.. grade 4s and 5s across the institution and.. part of the reason why the [*restructuring*] had to happen was because.. I wouldn't be surprised if a number of grade 4s.. had gone to HR and said 'look well I'm doing the same job as these guys.. why am I being paid.. less'... and I would have to agree with that because the role.. wasn't significantly different.. certainly it wasn't a whole grade different.. in terms of.. the level of responsibility it was quite similar.. and that's now been rectified to the university's credit³⁸

That language matters is suggested by participants stating they are put off by the way the sample G4 job description 'is worded' (Natalie, FG3):

I think it's things that everyone would do.. but in an.. elaborated.. tone @ [...] the language... is dressing it up a bit (Natalie, FG3)

I think all this kind of fancy language... the strategic management and all that... is probably stuff you do all the time but.. you add that word in front of it and you think oh god.. man! (Kat, FG2)

Natalie adds, shortly afterwards, that while administrators may well be already doing all of the tasks – including the leadership aspects – of this higher-grade role 'all of the time', they 'would never be.. accredited with that' (cf. 6.4). What seems to be an innocuous matter of 'fancy language' potentially has material consequences for those administrators who may apply for a G4 role, and be asked to provide evidence of previously-acquired management, leadership and strategic skills and experience.

The next section explores how participants regularly report finding themselves 'caught between a rock and a hard place' (Peter, FG3), being denied access to training and other opportunities aimed at developing the skills and experience required on higher grades.

7.1.2. Being caught between 'a rock and a hard place'

When asked whether they would get the sample G4 job if they applied for it (cf. Table 2, p.75, Q6), FG participants tend to stress the importance of having previously gained 'enough experience' over having 'the potential' to do the job:

James: Getting beyond a 3 at CSU is actually quite difficult.. on the one hand you could argue that.. all four of us here could have a good go at doing this job.. but if they applied the criteria strictly.. nobody here has got..

³⁸ Focus groups took part towards the end of the restructuring exercise; individual interviews were conducted after its results had been made public and changes effected, including a standardisation of certain CSU job descriptions.

- experience of managing... more than.. one office temp maybe so we could just as easily be ruled out or we could be given the job I think..
- Rob: I met someone recently about a job in another part of the university.. and it's something.. that I felt that I had definite experience.. -- I had the kind of skills [... for] that job.. but I didn't have direct experience of actually doing the job.. and he said to me "look.. I've got no doubt that you could do the job but.. it's.. demonstrating .. that you've got the experience.. direct experience" and I think that'd be the issue here
(FG1)
- Pam: They're looking for somebody that.. -- it's not a training opportunity -- somebody that has all those skills in place
(FG9)

However, especially when it comes to line-management, administrators report not being able to gain relevant experience and skills:

- Peter: [*Training*] has to be related to your current role [...] I went for.. a grade 4 position I was told I didn't have the management experience.. so I was like "okay I'm gonna need to get the management experience so let me go on the training"... training people then said "oh no.. you can't go on the training coz you don't have a team to manage"... (2) so... you're caught between a rock and a hard place [...]
- Camille: Same with me... I asked for project management and.. they were like "why do you need project management you don't have a project to manage"..
(FG3)
- Efie: I feel I can ask for training within reason like... I have to justify what it has to do with my job... so I can't do something that's.. beyond my current job because.. -- do you get what I mean? the training is about getting you to do your job better
- Monica: So that may help you progress in your career as well?
- Efie: Erm...
- Monica: Why not...
- Efie: Ye:ah d'you know... @ I just do.. my own sort of.. training.. and my own studying
(FG7)

FG participants mention being able to only get training that helps them do their current job better, rather than training which may help them develop and progress (a point also raised by Burton (1997) among others). The fact that training to do one's current job better is not made sense of as developmental (though it is by Monica, a new starter) suggests that the skills required at G4 are constructed and understood as significantly different from those required at G2/G3. Institutionally hindered from accessing the training that would help them progress, administrators become responsible for their own training and development, unless they can demonstrate, on the training booking form, how undertaking a specific training course would benefit their team, department and/or institution, i.e. others:

They're not focusing on your personal development.. it's your development.. as.. to what you can give... back (Natalie, FG3)

The next sub-section argues, with Eveline (2004), that this can be understood as a material consequence of the dominant devaluation of university admin.

7.1.3. Lack of development/progression and devaluation

That training and development for clerical and lower-level administrative workers is often considered as a cost rather than an investment is a point made in the literature (cf. Chapter 2, also cf. Burton, 1997), and an underlying pattern in the FG data set:

- Bev: Shouldn't there be.. some courses that lead to more managerial positions... rather than an advanced what you already know.. more of a junior leadership=
Yokow: =I wanted to do actually.. a short course here.. leadership and management.. coz that would help me... with what I'm doing now and I asked the university to pay 50% of it coz we're entitled as staff and.. no.. I can't=
Bev: =So they turned it down?
Yokow: Oh yeah yeah yeah coz it has nothing to do with my role and I'm thinking "well.. exactly!" [...] and I said I'm going to pay half of it and it's from 6:30 or whatever in the evening..
Francesca: You.. get 50% discount on.. short courses if you're a staff member
Yokow: They won't pay my 50% because it doesn't apply to my role
Francesca: But you just get 50% off.. don't you
Yokow: No I was told no because.. "why do I wanna be a leader"
Stacey: @
Yokow: What... "Do I need to be a manager"
Bev: I find that quite depressing actually the fact that.. they do say.. development but then "oh you don't need that for your role"
[...]
Yokow: And we're in a university I find it scandalous... I deal with these people every day and I can't sit on their course for 10 weeks
(FG5)

Yokow tells about being denied access to developmental training on the grounds that it is not related to her current role. This is reportedly based on assumptions of G3 generalist administrators as not having the potential to become leaders or managers, and of their role being so unrelated to their immediate step up, that of line-manager of administrators, than even the discount staff are usually entitled to is not applicable.

Assumptions of administrators as not having leadership potential go hand in hand with assumptions of them not *wanting* to progress and being content with their lot (cf. Chapter 9 for a discussion of how this assumption is gendered):

- Nikki: I think the assumption for every employee brought in at grade 2 needs to be that they would like to progress... and to have the opportunity to progress all the way up if they want to.. and I

think too often the assumption is they'll maybe get to grade 3 but then that's it.. look at the lack of grade 4 posts

Efie: Hm mm... (3) @

Monica: The thing is that many people are happy with what they have and they do not want to progress... because they've got other interests other than their job
[...]

Priya: But it would be nicer to.. to [have the option]

Efie: [have the option]

Priya: Get the encouragement and the training..

Nikki: Yeah I would like the opp -- I would like to have the right to say.. "no I don't want to progress"... but I wouldn't like that to be the assumption

(FG7)

The assumption that G2/G3 administrators do not want to progress is discursively sustained by the devaluation of their work as easy, dull, mundane and unimportant (cf. 6.1) and of the people who do it for a living as lacking ambition, intellectual vigour and motivation (cf. 6.3).

Administrators' reported difficulty in accessing developmental, and especially leadership, training appears to be a sector-wide, rather than CSU-specific, issue. This is not only suggested by the literature (cf. Chapter 2), but also by the following extract from FG7, where Efie discusses the 'cut-off' for staff wishing to participate in the women-only LFHE's Aurora programme:

I guess they're empowering them.. which is great.. but why is that cut-off at grade 5³⁹? what about the rest of us who actually... -- maybe I want to be a grade 5... if you give me the chance [...] I think if they allowed all these women down there [G2/G3 administrators].. the chance to.. get that exposure to that training then you'd see that change [*in the vertical gender imbalance*].. but what they've done is they've.. focused on grade 3.. well there's not as much down there but.. you know

(FG7)

The cut-off excluding G2/G3 female administrators from the Aurora programme denies them access to leadership training and opportunities to network beyond their institution. The exclusion of G2/G3 administrators is made sense of by Efie as the result of the dominant devaluation of admin work and workers ('there's not as much down there').

This devaluation is also understood by participants as preventing "other people" (in the excerpt below, recruiting panels) from seeing in an administrator a suitable candidate for a higher-grade role such as the sample G4 job participants were asked to comment on:

³⁹ The cut-off is actually at G4, which means that Aurora is reserved for those who have already overcome the first KCTP in HEA, excluding only clerical/admin staff.

- Gabby: So you were saying that you don't think your application would be received [positively]?
- Yokow: [of course not] no way.. no way.. they associate the expertise for.. grade 4 or 5 as totally different to.. what we do even though we know the.. ins and outs of the whole.. university and how things work..
- Bev: I don't think our skills are different [...] I think you could adapt to those roles.. but... you wouldn't get accepted in those roles because.. of our background you know [...]
- Yokow: We lose out.. straight away
(FG5)
- Efie: I think even though we probably have the skills to do these things.. because of the perception... that it is just admin.. people may not realise that.. it's the same skill-set that is probably required? to do these things? but it would be difficult to get something like this... because of the previous job that you have
- Nikki: Yeah cos we all said.. when you asked whether we.. do any of those things now.. we all sort of went yeah.. but I don't think people realise.. how much of these things we do?
(FG7)

Participants argue that, because G2/G3 staff do 'just admin', recruiting panels are unlikely to recognise that the skills required at G4 are not that different, and that G2/G3 administrators already do much of what is involved at G4 – albeit in ways which go unnoticed and unacknowledged.

Because of the institutionalisation of G2/G3 administrators' work as 'just admin', participants claim that *internal* progression may be particularly difficult⁴⁰ and that applying elsewhere might be the only way to progress:

- Samya: I got an interview for a job like this at [*another university*]... if I'd gone through somewhere like here.. I'd probably would have been laughed at by all the building... (1) I wouldn't have been encouraged.. even to apply for it..
[...]
- Kat: They make opinions of you and [...] you're pretty much stuck in that box.. [...] it's become institutional.. it's your own job and you're not really able to do anything else
(FG2)
- Vanessa: I reckon I could talk myself up and at least get an interview... <@If it was at another institution! @>
- All: @
- Vanessa: Cos here they know what I do! @ [...] obviously if you were trying to get this job somewhere where they know what you do.. they probably wouldn't take into consideration what you've done perhaps at another university [...] so I think it'd be easier at another institution to perhaps get to the interview stage.. because they'd look at your CV and they would see.. whereas I think that if you were trying to apply for the job from an internal point of view.. they would just go "oh.. that's Vanessa.. that's what she does blah blah blah"
(FG9)

⁴⁰ Also cf. 7.2, which briefly looks at mobility (i.e. leaving CSU) to progress.

Vanessa argues that 'knowing' what her current G2/G3 job is about would be enough for managers to dismiss her without even looking at her CV. That one's current role in HEA is 'used as a proxy for ability' (Burton, 1997: 88) results in administrators not being considered as potential candidates for G4 vacancies, which are then advertised externally.

External competition for the reportedly rare G4 vacancies that arise is indeed a point often raised by participants as hindering their progression. The lack of transparency around decisions to open up certain – but not all – vacancies to external candidates is in the following FG9 extract made sense of as the material consequence of the devaluation of G3 administrators and their work:

- Pam: For some positions it's internal only and for others it's external and we kind of know why.. but I think there should be some kind of policy on that?.. They say they offer staff development... and they've got.. an office full of grade 3s and <@they advertise outside for a grade 4@>.. why? don't say that you offer staff development...
- Vanessa: Because then you don't even get the chance to like.. apply or even go [for interview or...]
- Pam: [cos then you know] what's advertised outside.. even if you apply.. you know that it's just... yeah..
- Aba: The thing to me is that if you get somebody externally to come in.. but you know full well that there are more than capable staff to do that grade.. but you've gone externally.. gotten somebody in.. and you've got the grade 2s and 3s to teach that grade 4?
- Mel: It's not fair
- Aba: I can't quite get my head around it.. [...] hold on a minute.. I'm not good enough for this job.. why are you getting me to train.. my manager

(FG9)

When a G4 vacancy is advertised externally, the 'office full of grade 3s' reportedly take that as a sign that no administrators need apply, and that staff development is only paid lip service to. Advertising vacancies externally increases the chances of finding candidates who already have line-management (amongst other types of) experience, a requisite for most G4 roles which G3 administrators reportedly struggle with (cf. 7.1.2). Aba describes a paradoxical situation where those G3s who were deemed not to be 'good enough' for the G4 job are subsequently asked to train their externally-recruited manager. Again, administrators' knowledge about the 'ins and outs of the whole university' (Yokow, FG5) is not officially acknowledged or rewarded, yet it is tapped into to keep the organisation running (i.e. it is 'glue work', Eveline, 2004).

Stacey constructs progressing from G3 as making a 'leap' from secretary to boss:

We're secretaries.. we're not the bosses.. although it's not called that anymore but.. [...] how do you leap from being somebody's secretary to being... the somebody? that's a really difficult thing (FG5)

Stacey's and other FG participants' ways of making sense of their own lack of progression as a consequence of the devaluation of their work echo the findings of Tong's (2014) national survey findings, suggesting this might well be a sector-wide, rather than CSU-specific, issue:

The women respondents expressed feelings of being ghettoised into certain occupations, stereotyped as "just a secretary" and unable to make the transition to higher grade jobs [...] Many respondents also reported on the lack of opportunity to move to managerial and specialist roles, in spite of their high level qualifications and years of experience. Interviewee 11 reported that in her institution almost without fail external candidates were appointed to the higher level roles making it impossible for any-one who is seen as a secretary to gain promotion beyond a grade six⁴¹. Although there were exceptions, such as interviewee 24 who had risen, without a degree, from a grade one to a grade eight during her 10 years' service within one institution, this was rare (2014: 169).

The next section explores patterned ways of talking about (lack of) progression, co-produced by those research participants who did progress, internally or by leaving CSU.

7.2. Getting stuck: a structural or individual issue?

Competing patterns are co-constructed in interview with managers⁴² with regards to progressing in HEA. When talking about the structural barriers affecting their line-managed staff, managers at times highlight their own role in challenging such obstacles, constructing progression as a collaborative process. A much stronger pattern is provided by managers drawing on a neoliberal discourse of individual entrepreneurship, echoing Gill's (2014a&b) and Scharff's (2016) cultural workers, when narrating their own career history and/or providing career advice for G2/G3 administrators. This patterned account reframes getting stuck at G3 as the result of administrators' lack of initiative and, therefore, ability to embody the ideal neoliberal (HEA) worker as an 'entrepreneurial subject' (Scharff, 2016). The next sub-sections reflect on the functions of such variability, and on how managers navigate the contradictions or dilemmas posed by their competing accounts.

⁴¹ Equivalent to CSU G3 (cf. Tong, 2014: 333; Appendix B)

⁴² I.e. CSU managers and leavers who had management responsibilities at the time of the data collection (of whom all but one had previously been CSU G2/G3 administrators).

7.2.1. Lack of progression as a structural issue

Managers also talk about structural and institutional barriers hindering G2/G3 administrators' progression:

It's got potentially worse now?... because.. when you go from a grade 3.. there isn't many grade 4s?... and to get from a grade 3 to a grade 5 is a massive jump? so I can see how my grade 3s are a bit.. frustrated [...] I don't think... the restructure really did.. give all the schools.. the same kind of structure.. at all (M13)

The university.. years ago.. had a lot more money invested.. staff development.. and now it's leadership.. and staff.. development right? so... all the investment for development gets involved for grade 4 5 6 7 [...] a lot of the grade 2s and 3s must think there's just no development.. no training available (M2)

You're not guaranteed any opportunities and you could be stuck in a role for ever and ever and not go anywhere if someone doesn't move on [...] actually we just had some new roles we were allowed to.. create... at grade 4 and we managed to promote.. three people within our teams.. that was quite unique.. I have been here for almost 10 years now and that was the first time.. I have seen.. something like that.. and that was ssso difficult [...] you can't... you can't plan... for progression (M4)

M4 in particular frames institutional lack of investment in lower-level administrators' training and development and the lack of career path as structural issues which managers face with their G2/G3 staff. In doing so, managers such as M4 construct their role as facilitators and talk about progression as a shared responsibility, a collaborative process:

I personally feel I have a responsibility to give my direct reports as many opportunities as possible.. to be exposed to.. the next level.. if that's what they tell me they want to do [...] if that happened across the whole institution.. and across the sector.. then we'd be giving.. people in lower-grades the best possible.. chance of working their way up (M10)

For me it's about.. finding those people who are... showing that they're interested in doing something different... and finding those opportunities for them to do it as much as one can... within what you've got to offer [...] so it's relying on the manager.. and relying on the individual and it's the combination of both.. that would make it happen (M7)

Those managers who tend to express support for their staff's career progression and development also tend to co-construct the best managers as those who have, like themselves, progressed internally through the grades:

We're only.. credible and good at our jobs because.. we've.. done what our.. direct reports are doing? and I don't think we'd have their respect if.. we couldn't step in and.. help them in a crisis (M10)

Ah I think.. you need to have lived the life of the programme administrator.. to be able to <@do my job properly@>... I think you need to rise through the ranks? (H) I think it'd be really difficult to come into this.. kind of job.. not having done

that job before? [...] when somebody's asking you a question you're not just giving them a managerial answer you're giving them an answer.. based on the experience that you've had before (M5)

Line-managers' role as gatekeepers of their staff's career development and progression opportunities is a recurrent sub-theme across the data sets. M5, among others, stresses the importance of her line-managers' support and encouragement in her own career progression: 'I was given opportunities... people believed in my abilities.. every manager I've had has been really encouraging'. However, she also points out that such unconditional support might not be available for *all* administrators, as it could result in a financial loss for the institution:

From a <@university@> perspective.. you don't train people if you're not sure that they.. -- you know it would be really good to.. offer it to people but.. if you can't then place them.. somewhere.. it's a bit pointless and.. if they take the training and.. <@go elsewhere with it@> as well.. then that.. becomes a problem (M5)

Lack of support from one's line-manager is said to considerably reduce one's opportunities to develop and eventually progress, and this is flagged up in managers' and leavers' narratives:

Gabby: What did you find most.. helpful in your career progression?

M1: (5)... silence!

Gabby: [*smiles*]

M1: I have to say... I haven't found... anything particularly helpful... in the past [... until recently] I haven't had.. any encouragement.. I haven't had any training... people assume that line management is just something you need to do to progress... without realising that it is a skill in itself not everybody is suited to it... if you are gonna do it you need to be trained

L7: It's really hard.. to get someone.. to invest in you as a person? and if you don't get the investment.. it's hard .. for you to progress

Managers' patterned accounts display a certain degree of variability, depending on whose progression they are talking about, their own or G2/G3 administrators'. A stronger tendency in the interview data set is provided by managers drawing on a neoliberal discourse of individual entrepreneurship to describe what is required to progress in HEA. The next sub-section explores this variability and the effects it achieves.

7.2.2. (Lack of) Progression as the outcome of (lack of) individual entrepreneurship

Managers consistently state that they look for someone who takes initiative, shows enthusiasm and goes above and beyond what is required of them, for example by taking on extra tasks or projects:

You need to over-achieve in the current role.. you need to.. show [...] that you're.. making an impact and making things better... If people see that willingness to.. participate and not just focus on your work as a task to get done and disappear at the end of the day.. which is... -- <@it's fine to leave at 5 I'm not encouraging late working or anything@>.. but to take an interest.. vested interest (M1)

Someone who's showing a bit of an edge.. someone who's.. standing out a bit from the others? if I ask for volunteers.. someone who's gonna put their hand up or if... they've got a big piece of work.. they don't go.. "oh it's 5 o'clock" and go home.. you know... someone who's willing to stay an extra 10 minutes and.. and finish the job... (HHH) and that doesn't always happen @ with my team (M2)

M1's use of a disclaimer: 'I'm not encouraging late working or anything@>.. but' constructs 'taking a vested interest' as demonstrating one's availability to do extra work, including work longer hours as required – as does M2's quote.

The importance of networking within and beyond one's department or service, including 'getting your name known' and building 'connections with senior people' (M11), 'showing your face' and having your 'fingers in a few pies' (M6), is also recurrently mentioned in the interview data set. This suggests that the 'invisible workers' (Szekeres, 2004: 7) need to make themselves *visible* in order to be able to progress: it is not just about 'find[ing] the things that aren't working [*and*] fix[ing] them' (M5), it is about 'making sure people see you do it' (M1).

Those who show such initiative and commitment are talked about as being somehow "earmarked" for development opportunities and progression:

We've got someone who's grade 3 who we'd like to train up... so we try and.. get them ready for a grade 4 cos.. they're not quite there yet [...] just like... an introduction to.. managing people? (M6)

The 'leap' (cf. 7.1.1) between G3 and G4 can thus be bridged informally: 'in our own kind of way [...] not.. a written down thing' (M6), i.e. by picking those who 'show their face' and 'training them up'. That the allocation of such 'little opportunities that are not opened out to the whole team' might occur along gender lines is a point raised by some FG participants (cf. Chapter 9).

If progression is constructed as depending on individual entrepreneurship, lack of progression is therefore often reframed as the result of lack of personal initiative on the part of G3 administrators:

If someone's motivated and wants to progress... and they've got ambitions to do that... (1) there are always ways of finding ways to do it.. One shouldn't sit there and wait for those opportunities to be given.. but actually you have to be proactive and think about what you want as an individual and what you want your development to be... and go and talk to people about those opportunities (M7)

As Scharff (2016) argues, entrepreneurial subjectivity is constructed by drawing boundaries between the hard-working, entrepreneurial and the lazy, non-entrepreneurial subjects. In the extract above, M7 establishes an opposition between the motivated, ambitious, 'proactive' individual and the (lazy) one 'sit[ting] there and wait[ing]' for opportunities. If there are plenty of opportunities out there that are waiting to be grabbed, those who do not progress only have themselves to blame. The 'lazy', idle administrators are, M11 argues, 'very easy to spot': they are

sort of dead wood.. sort of drifting.. and happy with their lot [...] happy with.. the level they're at (M11)

Leaving CSU to progress is another case in point. From being the inevitable consequence of structural impediments (cf. 7.1.1) mobility is reframed as being evidence of personal entrepreneurship and ownership of one's career trajectory:

If you wanna stay where you are... in the particular department or whatever then yeah.. it can be quite challenging from that point of view.. but if you're prepared to move? ... then.. I've had no problem.. getting higher [...] there are always jobs coming up (L6)

Again, movement and activity (as pointed out by Scharff, 2016) characterise narratives of entrepreneurial subjectivity. In contrast, G2/G3 administrators are constructed as expecting (meaning both taking for granted and waiting) to move up just because there is a grade structure that suggests linear progression:

There's a misconception... that.. you... can become a [*G3 generalist administrator*] and then you're gonna get promoted.. you're gonna get somewhere... you're not... [...] only you can get yourself into that position (M13)

Managers also argue that not all administrators understand what progression actually entails. Although the managers interviewed experienced linear progression up the grades, they argue that sideways moves (also cf. ECU, 2014b) to get breadth of

experience, and to subsequently focus and specialise, are often required to eventually progress:

It might not be.. seeing career progression as this sort of.. linear 3 to 4 4 to 5 [...] it's about breadth... so [...] what you might wanna do is.. 3 to 3.. up to a 4.. so you actually get some breadth of experience (M7)

I line-manage someone who... wants to move on but doesn't really... have an idea where.. he wants to go.. he just knows that he's been in this job now for several years.. on the same grade and he wants to move a grade up... but he's... going all around the shop?... he tried a lot of different things.. and didn't really get anywhere... I think because.. he doesn't have a clear idea.. of what he wants to do.. [...] the opportunities are there.. they just need to know where they want to go (L2)

FG participants and leavers, however, do seem to make sense of progression in similar ways, i.e. as requiring breadth of experience, increased accountability and strategic responsibilities, as well as specific, specialised skills:

What the issue is in admin... -- because once you get to a grade 4 it's easier for you to then.. progress.. cos you just get more exposure and... more responsibility... Grade 2s and 3s are more... generic.. with actual less specific... competency requirements (L7)

I would say from grade 3 onwards. you're getting more strategic... more management-orientated.. so the operational... side.. gets less and less.. and you're looking at.. the strategic where are we going.. how are we going to get there (Peter, FG3)

Chapter 9 discusses the gendered overtones of constructing progression through KCTPs in HEA as requiring strategic skills and increasing specialisation.

Interestingly, managers' accounts of their own career progression⁴³ from G2/G3 are characterised by substantial variability. Some managers produce seamless narratives, consistently drawing on a neoliberal discourse of individual entrepreneurship:

If I'd just sat there and if I'd just done my job and worked 9 to 5 and gone home every day I personally don't think I would have.. progressed to where I am... that doesn't mean.. I think the only way you can do it is by working long hours but.. if I hadn't pushed myself [...] then... I wouldn't.. probably be here (M3)

I've not really found anything particularly helpful in my career progression.. I've had to go out and find it and I've had to go out and push for it.. [...] I haven't had any help.. I've done it all myself.. I've not had people say to me.. "go for this or go for that" or "you'd be good for this" (M12)

⁴³ Managers' career trajectory narratives are an incredibly rich part of the interview data set. Due to this project's focus on lower-level administrators, several points raised by managers go beyond the scope of this thesis and are not dealt with extensively here. For example, their identity construction as administrators, managers and/or leaders is an interesting topic which deserves further research (cf. 12.3.3).

Similarly to Scharff's (2016) cultural workers, M12 mentions past difficulties to highlight how her entrepreneurial self was able to overcome them on her own.

Other managers produce competing accounts, constructing their progression as the result of luck or chance, of being "in the right place at the right time", being "earmarked" for progression:

@<I never planned any of it!@> it's probably quite a.. <@ lazy way of looking at it@> but I think.. all the jobs that have happened to me have kind of like happened by chance.. they've come up and.. it's been the right time and I've gone for it [...] it kind of fell into my lap (M2)

In a way things have just fallen in my lap.. I've been quite lucky I think.. because... yeah I haven't actively been out there looking for.. roles.. I've been asked to do.. all of them actually (M6)

A lot of the time I was encouraged to apply for the various posts and a lot of the time.. because of restructuring you know they would.. (2) I suppose senior management would... (1.5) maybe... (1.5) see the need to have... (1) a particular person in a particular post (M9)

Managers' accounts also vary depending on whose progression they are talking about – theirs or G2/G3 administrators', and competing accounts are produced by the same individual in different parts of their interview. For example, M8 provides these two competing accounts of lack of progression:

I was stuck on a grade 2 for a long time and I'm being honest here.. I used to think it depends on who you know [...] I applied for a discretionary didn't get it.. I applied for job matching.. anything... and my boss.. tried a few times for me and... I didn't get it so [...] it was a very frustrating time because I was thinking.. I'm never gonna.. grow in this role.. I'm not gonna get a higher grade [...] there wasn't any.. anything... racism.. feminism.. whatever.. I've not.. -- that didn't come through my mind for one second.. (HH) but I used to think it was unfair... that word used to always come to me

The problem comes when you're thinking.. I can do this.. grade 2 job.. but you don't demonstrate to me how you're gonna do the grade 3... I'm thinking you're still stuck at 2... [...] just say to me.. I've got the skills.. and I've done this and I can bring this to you I've got a bit of enthusiasm [...] sometimes it's just.. too hard to give a grade 3 a grade 4... because.. [...] the accountability bit is what people miss.. the higher you go the more responsible you are for your actions [...] I don't want you to <@just come for money@> [*but because*] you wanna learn... you bring something to that role.. [...] you're not gonna progress.. if you're already putting a barrier on.. "why should I do extra" (M8)

In the first extract, M8 talks about how her career stalled on G2 for a long time, no matter how hard she tried to progress, to the point of hinting at favouritism (but disavowing racism and sexism, cf. below). When generally talking about G2/G3 administrators' lack of progression however, M8 constructs it as the result of their lack of individual entrepreneurship. Later on in the interview, M8 navigates the ideological

dilemma created by these two competing accounts by reframing her own past lack of progression as her fault:

I'm being honest you know.. if nobody challenged me I'm probably one of those people who sit and moan.. "oh I wish I had done this I wish I had done that I wish I had taken that risk"... but then you're sitting there.. and I think that's your own fault and I realised that (M8)

Managers regularly navigate the apparent contradiction created by these competing constructions of progression by reasserting the "individual entrepreneurship" account. For example, both M2 and M6 (amongst others) first talk about being stuck in the same role for a long time, mention structural impediments, and construct their own career progression as the result of luck, being in the right place at the right time, even being "earmarked" (cf. p.148). Both subsequently argue that in order to progress G2/G3 administrators should take initiative and ownership of their own career trajectory, e.g. by taking on extra projects to 'stand out' and 'show a bit of an edge' (cf. p.145). Later on in their interviews, both reframe their own past (lack of) progression as the result of (lack of) individual entrepreneurship:

Probably the reason that I stayed there for so long was because.. I was like.. "ooh I'm not happy".. and getting involved in a lot of stuff but I didn't... actually.. actively seek.. another role (M2)

I think a lot you end up doing yourself cos I don't think there is.. a natural career progression.. which sounds weird cos <@I have gone through it@>... but I do think that a lot of people expect things to come to them [...] no if you wanna go to a grade 4... put yourself out there a bit and.. go and meet people and talk to them.. so a lot of people who say.. there is no career progression here just need to actually [...] look elsewhere? .. but people don't necessarily take a lot of ownership.. with their own.. career progression (M6)

Individual entrepreneurship ends up being co-constructed as the only way to progress against the odds (when these are acknowledged). Only those who do not 'moan', keep their head down and work hard(er) (i.e., often, long hours) can become the ideal neoliberal HEA worker and therefore progress:

Just... keep.. going! just be good at your job.. if something upsets you deal with it.. don't... be too... negative... [...] as a professional don't.. let that happen... I've got a colleague who would never progress in her career because.. she is too vocal and she.. moans and she's too loud and too negative.. just rein it in you know.. if you wanna progress.. sometimes you need to keep your mouth shut... just get on with your job keep your head down be the best that you can be (M12)

The extracts from M2's, M6's, M8's and especially M12's interviews exemplify how, similarly to Scharff's cultural workers, managers construct themselves as 'entrepreneurial subjects': as 'embracing risks, learning from drawbacks and staying

positive', 'surviving difficulties', 'competing with the self', and 'disavowing inequalities' (2016: 112-117; also cf. Chapter 10). They establish boundaries with those who have not progressed, i.e. G2/G3 administrators, ultimately blaming them for their lack of entrepreneurship, hard work, and progression.

Managers' construction of themselves as ideal neoliberal HE(A) workers has further implications. If, in order to progress, HEA workers need to 'rein it in', 'keep [their] mouth shut' and their 'head down', avoid moaning and being too negative, then the potential range of accounts and counter-discourses that managers as successful neoliberal HEA workers can produce are significantly limited. Leavers who are managers appear somehow less constrained by institutional discourse and thus to a certain extent more critical of CSU and more able to produce competing, subversive accounts and discourses. However, they are still subject to sectorial discursive constraints, limiting what 'can be said' about HEA (Willig, 2011: 111; also cf. 12.2.1 for further discussion).

Interestingly, managers mention having to deal with other structural issues at their current career stage. Some explicitly mention not wanting to progress to senior management grades because of increased workloads and responsibilities:

It seems like not very much money more for a lot of extra headaches.. almost like... they expect you not to be able to do the job in 35 hours... if you're not giving free overtime? it's almost like you're not considered to be keen enough (L6)

G5 managers tend to cite lack of structure as hindering their next logical career step:

I think that's our problem in academia.. full stop.. you've got the grade 5s and then there's a big leap.. to the grade 7? There's not really many grade 6 jobs... around.. so I have looked into it [...] to see if there are anything that I should be tailoring myself to.. there's just not really anything that naturally flows (M6)

When it comes to "leaping" from G5 to G6/G7, individual entrepreneurship is reportedly no longer enough to overcome structural issues, although it was consistently constructed as the only way to make another "leap", between G3 and G4.

Lack of structure is recurrently cited as an issue *generalist* managers (cf. 2.1) face especially vis-à-vis the level of specialisation required on senior management grades. These include roles as leaders of specialist functions such as IT, HR, marketing etc.:

So my role's quite a generalist role? and personally I don't think there is a natural... progression? [...] you might have to think about.. a sideways move? to get more knowledge or a secondment (M3)

There aren't many.. grade 6 jobs.. so you can get stuck.. because you're not trained as a HR specialist you're not trained as a marketing specialist so it's kind of like.. where do you go.... I think that's one the biggest problems is that.. there is very little space for you to move [...] because actually the roles are so varied as well? and require.. quite specific.. kind of experience (L4)

For these highly specialised roles, previous higher education experience is reportedly not an essential requirement:

It does become quite specialised as you progress in higher education.. and maybe in these roles.. when you go into the very high level roles you know if you've got a head of.. IT for the university... he or she doesn't necessarily have had to work in a.. higher education environment they would have had those skills from.. a bank or financial institution or whatever... but some.. policy leaders.. would have come from other institutions (M9)

They don't necessarily need.. knowledge of higher education... because their roles are significantly more specialist.. and... those skills are transferable from one sector to another (M10)

To run the neoliberal, marketised university (cf. 2.1), the skills and knowledge required at senior management levels are not necessarily strictly HEA-related (unlike those for G2-5, M10, among others, argues). As business-management and development skills are increasingly sought after in the entrepreneurial university (as the corpus-based study of CSU job descriptions also suggested, cf. Appendix C), external competition from other institutions and most of all from the corporate world comes into play. FG participants and interviewees consistently talk about candidates for senior management roles being headhunted, 'parachuted in' (Calvin, FG1) from the corporate sector:

Anna: Don't you think.. some universities would find it more advantageous if they had like... university background

Samya: No

Anna: No?

Samya: @
[...]

Amala: I think you gotta be quite... business-like.. am I allowed to say that? to make sure the place succeeds

Samya: Yeah I'd say it would probably be really attractive to someone who's had more project management.. more business.. marketing... got actual figures to show.. experience which they're more likely to get outside of a university.. rather than they are here

(FG2)

Nikki: In my husband's job they brought in a few people after a sort of a restructure.. that were from the corporate world.. they brought them into the university cos they thought well.. we want these sorts of like.. business-type principles to be brought in

(FG7)

The KCTP between G5 and G6 is also where the proportion of men overtakes that of women at CSU. In the first half of the FGs and interviews, gender is rarely if ever mentioned, and lack of progression/external competition are not talked about as affecting women (or men) in particular. When prompted to account for the vertical gender imbalance, however, participants tend to reframe lack of progression as a “gender issue”, in patterned ways explored in Chapter 9.

7.3. Conclusion

This chapter explored patterns of similarity and variability in participants’ talk about progression (and lack thereof) across the data sets (cf. RQ2). It discussed how FG participants consistently talk about getting stuck at G3 as a structural issue (cf. 7.1.1), and make sense of their lack of development and progression opportunities as a material consequence of the devaluation of their work (cf. 7.1.2 and 7.1.3).

An interesting similarity between administrators’ and managers’ talk is that both groups display a tendency to mention structural issues *ahead of* them, along with external competition, hindering future career progression. An equally interesting difference is that only administrators tend to make sense of their lack of progression and development opportunities as the result of the devaluation of their work.

Patterns in managers’ ways to talk about their own career trajectories as well as about progression for G2/G3 administrators were discussed, and competing accounts were analysed in terms of their functions (cf. 7.2). Of particular interest was the variability in managers’ accounts, and how they navigate the ideological dilemma created by competing discursive constructions of progression by reasserting the dominance of a neoliberal discourse of individual entrepreneurship. In constructing themselves as entrepreneurial subjects, as ‘embracing risks, learning from drawbacks and staying positive’, ‘surviving difficulties’ and ‘competing with the self’ (Scharff, 2016: 111-7), managers also establish boundaries with those who do not embody the ideal of neoliberal HEA worker, i.e. G2/G3 administrators (including managers’ own past selves as G2/G3 administrators) getting stuck.

Being pro-active, mobile and self-entrepreneurial, working long hours and ‘rein[ing] it in’ are mentioned as the pre-requisites to succeed in the neoliberal, entrepreneurial university (cf. 2.1) not only for academics, but also for “non-academics”. This chapter contributes to previous analyses of the ‘psychic life’ of neoliberalism as it is ‘lived out’ by cultural and academic workers (cf. Gill, 2014b; Gill & Donaghue, 2016; Scharff, 2016). Managers’ own discursive construction as entrepreneurial subjects has many points in common with the ‘contours of

entrepreneurial subjectivity' identified by Scharff (2016) in cultural workers' accounts. Further research could provide supporting (or contrasting) evidence (cf. 12.3.3).

When it comes to accounting for their own *current* difficulty in progressing further, i.e. to highly-specialised senior management positions, G5 managers no longer construct individual entrepreneurship as a panacea to overcome structural issues. This is because G5 generalist managers reportedly face competition from the prototypical entrepreneurial subject, i.e. candidates from the corporate world already possessing the business-management and development skills required to run the neoliberal, entrepreneurial university. What Mautner calls 'the colonisation of academia by the market' (2005: 95, cf. 2.1), both in terms of practices and discourse, is particularly visible in participants' co-constructed accounts of what is required to progress to HEA senior management grades.

Although (lack of) development and progression are initially talked about in apparently gender-neutral terms, they tend to be re-framed as gendered once participants are prompted to account for the gender imbalance. Participants appear to make sense of the horizontal gender imbalance, administrators' lack of progression, and the vertical gender imbalance as interlinked phenomena:

A lot of women do get stuck at the bottom.. when I get applications for grade 2 and 3 jobs.. it tends to be 70% women at least.. I think.. they're seen more as administrators (M2)

The overarching aim of the following two chapters is to tease out how university admin work is discursively feminised (women are 'seen more as administrators') when participants account for the horizontal gender imbalance (cf. Chapter 8); and how lack of progression is reframed as a "gender issue" ('a lot of *women do* get stuck at the bottom') when participants account for the vertical gender imbalance (cf. Chapter 9). This overarching aim also involves exploring how the devaluation of university admin work (initially constructed as affecting *all* administrators) is in turn reframed as gendered, i.e. discursively articulated as both cause and effect of its construction as "women's work".

Chapter 8. The Discursive Construction of University Admin as Women's Work

This chapter aims to unpack M2's point that women 'are *seen* more as administrators' (cf. p.153). Section 8.1 summarises patterns in participants' talk about the skills required to be a good administrator. Framed, at first, as gender-neutral (8.1.1), these skills can be made sense of as gendered through theoretical interpretation of the data and reference to the literature in Chapter 3 (cf. 8.1.2). Section 8.2 explores participants' discursive feminisation of the ideal university admin worker. When explicitly asked to talk about gendered work in HEA and/or to account for the gender imbalance, participants tend to reframe the very skills required to be a good administrator as (stereo)typical women's skills. By drawing on an overarching gender difference discourse (and sub-discourses), participants simultaneously account for the underrepresentation of men in these roles in terms of their being (or being considered as) "not good enough" (cf. 8.3). Also explored in this section are the effects, in terms of the potential for discursive change, of framing gender differences as "actual/natural" or stereotypical when accounting for the horizontal imbalance.

8.1. Is the "good" university administrator gender-neutral?

When asked what skills make a good university administrator (cf. Table 2, p.75, Q4), FG participants and interviewees do not make explicit references to gender. They tend to discursively construct an (apparently) gender-neutral "ideal" university admin worker, often recycling institutional discourse (of which the corpus-based study offered a snapshot, cf. Appendix C). Section 8.1.1 provides some data examples to illustrate how research participants conjure up an image of a helpful, caring, patient individual who is organised, able to multi-task, flexible, resilient and has excellent communication and people skills. Through theoretical interpretation of the data and references to the literature, Section 8.1.2 discusses how these skills/personal qualities can be made sense of as gendered.

8.1.1. The "skills" of a good administrator

FG participants consistently describe the good administrator as an effective communicator, stressing their ability to interact at all levels, 'from students right up to the [*Head of CSU...*] the public.. externals.. the press' (Peter, FG3), to 'manage difficult.. personalities... [...] very diplomatically but firmly' (Bev, FG5) and to deal with people 'from all over the world' (Pauline, FG8). This emphasis on communication

skills is explicitly linked to the customer-service aspect of generalist administrator roles. For example, Rachel equates being 'good at customer service' with being good 'at communication' (FG6). Working in 'the service sector', the good administrator has to be 'personable' (e.g. Rob, FG1; Aba, FG9), 'approachable', 'a people person' or at least 'someone who likes people' (Natalie & Jodie, FG3). Interpersonal skills, one of the essential requirements to be a good university administrator, are framed as a personal attribute, as something that you either innately possess or not.

As Mel puts it, being 'customer-focused' also means to 'help and care about people' (FG9). The use of verbs such as 'to help' and 'to look after' is indeed a recurrent pattern in the FG data set. Participants state that their role involves, for instance, 'dealing with students' problems.. helping with their load' (Nikki, FG7), 'look[ing] after a course and all the students on that course' (Katerina, FG2) and 'car[ing] for the academics' (Calvin, FG1). University 'admin' is often talked about as caring work: Calvin, for example, states that 'it's become more pastoral as a role... it feels more like you are a carer', and Jack compares working in university administration to social service work (FG1). The good administrator is constructed as caring for and about others, enjoying being part of the students' journey (Andrea, FG4), 'watching them grow' (Efie, FG7), and 'developing a personal kind of relationship' with them (Majid, FG8).

In order to help others, the good administrator needs to be 'sympathetic' (e.g. James, FG1); 'understanding' (e.g. Katerina, FG2) and able to 'empathise' (e.g. Andrea, FG4):

Communicating with the student... making them feel like.. we're here to actually help you and make your life a lot more easier... so I always try and put myself in their shoes as a student.. and how I felt at the time (Aba, FG9)

With their students, the good administrator is said to act almost like a parent, trying to strike a balance between caring – e.g. 'I don't wanna say I baby them but.. I have [...] a softly softly approach' – and stepping back, so that they can 'get their act together and sort themselves out' (Andrea, FG4).

Another personal characteristic of the good administrator is, FG participants argue, patience. Patience is required 'not just with students.. but also in terms of looking through a lot of documentation that.. can send you to sleep at times' (Joan, FG4); with repetitive, monotonous work; with external stakeholders, such as Priya's 'irate vendors' (FG7), calling up to complain; and with 'the academic self.. [who] can be quite erm.. demanding' (M2). The good administrator needs to remain patient and calm even in unexpected situations, when their role is to troubleshoot:

I find that you need to sort of have this.. weird sort of.. double thing of being.. really really patient and really really calm.. while at the same time you're doing about <@fifteen hundred things under the surface@> [...] but you have to at the same time because you're customer facing you're student-facing and you're dealing with the public.. you have to maintain kind of.. a façade of being really really calm and on top of things <@even though you might not be@> (Nikki, FG7)

The good administrator thus needs to multi-task effectively, and be a 'jack of all trades' (e.g. Vanessa, FG9). Organisational, planning and time-management skills, attention to detail and the ability to prioritise and meet conflicting deadlines are consistently mentioned across the data sets. L7 concisely summarises these requirements:

you also need to be very organised.. cos effectively... in my role I kind of do the leg work.. for my [*senior academic*...] so he relies on me.. that I'm organised in order to make sure that he's ready for his meetings.. and because a lot of things are kind of thrown at you at once.. you need to be able to.. multi-task effectively.. and make sure that things are getting done... on time (L7)

Multi-tasking and organisational skills are regularly mentioned alongside communication/people skills, as if they were the other side of the same coin:

Jodie: I think it's just more my... erm.. personality that kind of lends itself to it.. more than anything so just being quite.. anal... in my sort of... -- organisationally and just generally being... someone who likes... people [...]

Natalie: I think Jodie is bang on there.. they're the two main I would say as well.. organised and.. approachable
(FG3)

Aba: You have to be good in terms of communication [...] but organisational skills you definitely -- it's one of the.. top ones @ [...]

Mel: I think if you're like a perfectionist or.. really organised... or a planner in real life.. in your normal life
(FG9)

Like communication/interpersonal skills, organisational skills are also framed as personal qualities rather than actual skills that can be acquired for one's professional development: you either are a good administrator, or you are not.

As Victoria puts it, the good administrator also needs to be able to 'think on [their] feet' in order to 'deal with the stuff that comes a bit left-field' (FG4). Flexibility and resilience are often mentioned as necessary to address unexpected issues as they arise, and restructure one's priorities very quickly. The good administrator has to 'enjoy being interrupted all the time.. or [at least] be able to cope.. with a lot of interruptions' (Bev, FG5). Being resilient also means being 'think-skinned [...] stick up for yourself' (Francesca, FG5); being able to recover quickly whenever people are

'really really rude to you', by having 'a little laugh about it [...] and mov[ing] on' (Nikki, FG7). In other words, resilience is a skill that administrators reportedly need in order to cope with what they talk about as their lack of authority and their being 'at the beck and call' of others (cf. 6.4). Framed in this way, resilience is a form of emotional labour: it is a skill required to deal with aggressive and abusive customers, in any service occupation (Korczyński & Evans, 2013; Nixon, 2009; Tyler & Taylor, 2001, cf. 3.3).

In situated, local discourses participants therefore partly recycle institutional discourse (cf. Appendix C) to describe and construct an *apparently* gender-neutral good administrator, who needs to be an organised and communicative individual in order to provide excellent customer service to students, academic colleagues and external stakeholders. At the same time, several participants go beyond simply restating what is required of them within institutional discourse. For example, they stress the caring aspects of their role as well as the skills required to deal with what they describe as the drawbacks of being a *lower-level generalist* administrator. Put differently, the emotional labour these roles reportedly require appears to be, as flagged up by previous scholarship (cf. 3.1) a hidden requirement, rarely featured in job descriptions (and therefore taken-for-granted and unrewarded).

Generally speaking, managers (including leavers who are managers) report looking for the same skills/personal attributes when recruiting for a G2/G3 posts, thus echoing institutional discourse as well as FG participants' situated discourse. At times, managers report looking for something extra in order for a candidate to stand out during the recruitment process. For example, some cite enthusiasm, interest, and even previous experience in higher education (e.g. M3, M9), due to increasing competition for these roles.

Other managers state that they look for 'confidence', often meaning a 'confident communicator': for example, 'someone who's confident to speak to people' (M10) and has 'enough umpf about them' (M12). For M4, the good administrator needs confidence in order to 'try to come up with solutions to problems before they come running to [her] straight away'. In other words, they need to be proactive, able to take initiative and work independently. M2 says that she tends to recruit someone

who would be able to... stand up to an academic member of staff if they weren't following policy [...] and you need to be able to do that at grade 2 [smiles] so <@you need someone @> who is confident but who's polite.. [...] they need to be... organised and.. willing to muck in and willing to do.. okay fine so.. photocopying a bunch of receipts... is not.. exciting work.. but you have to be willing to do it.. so if you're gonna go "oh.. that's beneath me".. then that's no good! You have to be willing to chip in (M2)

The good administrator is therefore also confident in that no task – not “even” photocopying – should feel as if it were beneath them, or undermine their confidence. Chapter 9 discusses how this type of confidence, required not to feel demeaned by allegedly menial tasks (and aggressive “customer” behaviour), is subsequently talked about as gendered in both data sets.

The next sub-section claims that the literature reviewed in Chapter 3 provides some theoretical grounding to argue that talk about most, if not all, the skills/personal attributes required to be the ideal university admin worker can be interpreted as gendered.

8.1.2. A feminised ideal university admin worker

In the first half of the research encounters (cf. Table 2, p. 75, Qs 1-6, Table 3, p.81, Qs 1-9), the ideal university admin worker, very much like the ideal ICT worker described by Kelan’s research participants (e.g. 2008, 2009a, cf. 3.3) is, at least apparently, discursively constructed as gender-neutral. On the other hand, the scholarship reviewed in Chapter 3 shows that, in so-called “Western” societies, caring, communicating, and multi-tasking/being organised are socially and discursively constructed as women’s ‘innate capabilities, interests and aspirations’ (Fitzsimons, 2002: 88; cf. 3.3).

Work which requires such skills/personal attributes is therefore considered and constructed as “women’s work”, i.e. work women allegedly are “better” at than men. Researching occupational sex segregation within the cultural and creative industries, Hesmondhalgh and Baker argue that the overrepresentation of women in marketing, public relations and production co-ordination roles is driven by ‘gender dynamics’, i.e. ‘stereotypes or prevailing discourses’ (2015: 23). These construct women as more caring and nurturing, better communicators and ‘better organised’, and men as more creative and better at technical work. The authors conclude that ‘gender stereotypes matter hugely in the division of labour by sex’ (Ibid: 35). In addition to being allegedly better at communicating, caring and emotional labour, women are frequently also constructed as ‘more patient’ and as having ‘a higher tolerance than men’ (Tyler and Taylor, 1998, cf. Chapter 3). This does not only allow them to cope with boring, repetitive work, but also to deal with difficult, aggressive customers.

As for women’s allegedly natural ability to multi-task, one only needs to carry out a quick internet search to discover how commonplace this idea is in contemporary Western societies. UK media eagerly reported the results of one research study which

found *some* sex differences in the ability to multitask (Stoet et al., 2013⁴⁴; ignoring several other studies which did not). ‘Women have known it for generations – and the proof has finally arrived’ announced the Daily Mail (Spencer, 2013; also solving the long-standing mystery of why men are – allegedly – better at reading maps): men ‘are better at concentrating on single *complex* tasks’, whereas women are ‘hardwired to *juggle* jobs’ (Ibid: emphasis added; cf. Chapter 9). The article concludes that ‘the sexes are as different as alien races’. One of the authors of the study, interviewed by the BBC, stated:

the average woman is better able to organise her time and switch between tasks than the average man [...] There's no point denying these differences exist' (in Morgan, 2013).

Participants’ talk about the good administrator as a communicative, organised, caring individual who can multi-task, empathise and is patient enough to carry out repetitive work and deal with sometimes aggressive customers, constructs an only seemingly gender-neutral ideal university admin worker. It is hardly surprising that, when explicitly asked to account for the horizontal gender imbalance, this study’s participants tend to reframe these very skills as gendered, and construct women as “better” university administrators.

8.2. Think admin, think female

- Gabby: Research tells us that people have certain perceptions of women's work and men's work.. what do you think these perceptions could be in relation to university administration..
- M5: Oh I suppose men as managers? women as.. <@the ladies in the office!@>
- L2: It is seen.. academic administration [...] as a... female job.. for some reason...
- M7: If you took it at a very broad level.. then you'd find that.. women are there as department secretaries.. or in the current... course administrator-type roles cos things have moved on.. [...] and they probably work in student services [...] I think there is still a.. culture... within the sector that... -- it tends to be a picture of women in certain... -- say you take the grade 3 and certain jobs in particular? they are dominated by women [...] it depends on how one... (1) uses the term admin...

When prompted to comment on perceptions of gendered work in HEA, participants regularly establish a binary opposition between women in admin (e.g. M5’s ‘ladies in

⁴⁴ In fact, the authors of this study conclude that ‘the near lack of empirical studies on gender differences in multitasking should caution against making strong generalisations’ (Ibid: 18).

the office') and men in management, leadership and decision-making roles (and to a lesser extent, technical/professional roles such as IT and finance, cf. Chapter 9). L2's and M7's quotes exemplify how the whole of 'academic administration', and especially *certain (admin) roles*, are reportedly 'seen' as "women's work".

Participants draw on this "think admin, think female" / "think manager, think male" binary not only to comment on perceptions of gendered work, but also to account for the gender imbalance: both horizontal, as discussed in this chapter, and vertical (cf. Chapter 9). To account for women's over-representation in "admin" roles, participants tend to reframe the same skills/personal attributes required to be a "good" administrator (cf. 8.1.1) as (stereo)typical women's skills. Drawing on elements of an overarching gender differences discourse, women are consistently constructed as (or as being considered to be) better at:

- a) caring, communicating and, therefore, customer care/service (8.2.1),
- b) multi-tasking, being organised and "doing everything" (8.2.2),
- c) secretarial work (8.2.3)

The ideal university admin worker ends up being feminised regardless of whether gender differences around skills/personal attributes are framed as real/natural or as stereotypes/assumptions – and participants tend to continuously shift between the two. On the other hand, this patterned variability in participants' accounts works to different effects, discussed in 8.3.

8.2.1. The "women as carers" and "women as superior communicators" gendered discourses

Participants consistently account for the over-representation of women in university admin roles by commenting on the caring nature of the of work, and drawing on a "women as carers" gendered discourse:

More women cos it's a bit more pastoral (Calvin, FG1)

I'm not surprised by these statistics... [...] university admin.. is kind of a caring role?... so you're there to.. help people.. and maybe women are just better at that? .. than men? (L7)

I guess it's assumed.. that women have better.. softer skills (H) and caring skills... so some -- it might be viewed that erm.. women are able to provide.. that kind of.. support to students maybe in a.. nice way (M1)

Women's over-representation in university admin roles is accounted for in terms of their difference from – or, rather, their (alleged) superiority to – men ("actual", cf. L7's quote, or perceived/assumed, cf. M1's quote).

Unpacking the “women as carers” discourse, what (supposedly) makes women better at care work is their (stereo)typical patience and empathy. A few participants explicitly link these to the so-called “maternal instinct”:

Working alongside men... I find that women do tend to have more patience.. and [...] if you're front-facing or student-focused [...] you definitely need to empathise with the student and have patience with them (Aba, FG9)

You're working with every very sort of.. stereotypes here you know.. these are jobs that require sort of.. patience.. calmness.. slow and repetitive work (M4)

Oh gosh <@this does make me sound like a feminist!@>... I think that women are better at... doing these types of jobs they can be more approachable [...] because... (1) you're more.. maternal so you have more compassion that sort of thing... I mean it's horrible really.. I'm really being horrible to men and I love men! (M12)

M12 equates stating that women are better at caring with being a feminist. She distances herself from “man-hating” feminists but nonetheless constructs men as less approachable, compassionate and, therefore, suitable to these jobs (also cf. 8.3).

Women are constructed as better than men at caring also in that they are ‘traditionally [...] more into the people side of things’ (M4). Due to their (stereo)typical people skills and empathy, women are (perceived as) more competent communicators and better listeners, i.e. as (stereo)typically possessing the essential requisites to deliver good “customer care”:

Gabby: Can you think of any other reasons [*why so many women are in these jobs*]

Jodie: I don't know maybe it's partly because of what we were saying about people and social skills and that kind of thing [... *these roles are*] so... social in terms of you always having to deal with people and talk to people all the time

(FG3)

Monica: Women are.. better when dealing with the external world that's it.. when you have to deal with customers [...] we are definitely.. better because.. we are emotional

(FG7)

Regardless of whether they are framed as real or stereotypical, gender differences around caring and communicating are said to go as far as to influence recruitment decisions:

Vanessa: Women are just generally more in customer-service-type positions.. so if you're dealing with students face-to-face I think.. a woman=

Mel: =would be better yeah=

Aba: =they'd put a woman in there yeah

Vanessa: I just think people.. they just think they're going to be more empathetical

Aba: And funny enough you saying that.. <@in past experience@> [...] women have been more empathetic and they do take more time with the students.. more so than men

(FG9)

Victoria: What I've read around... gender stereotyping is more... that... that women are considered to have a lot more of the soft skills.. around... empathy and... that... that is not as strong in.... male employees.. and that... you would find that some people may consider men for... a slightly different role that wouldn't require as much empathy

(FG4)

Some participants appear to imply that such (gender-biased) recruitment decisions are sound because they are made to the benefit of students and academic staff. This argument works to legitimise the over-representation of women in these roles in terms of what is best for the “customer” (also cf. Tyler and Taylor, 1997) :

Yokow: Some academics.. approach a woman when they have some questions or.. they can't do certain things [...] because... they're not embarrassing themselves I suppose.. they feel comfortable enough.. to talk to us and they believe we can understand [...] I think they think.. maybe as a female administrator you'd be less judgemental

(FG5)

Samya: As a point of contact with the students.. you're like a nurturing figure... I find the way the students approach me.. compared to John would be very different.. they'd come to me with their problems.. you know.. go to Samya.. she'll sort it all out for you... well.. I don't know if that's a reflection of John not... @ -- also.. they come to me with such personal problems like.. more than they need to @

Anna: I think [...] especially young girls.. they feel more comfortable talking about their personal problems to a woman rather than to a man

(FG2)

Male administrators, e.g. Samya's colleague John, are thus “not good enough” from the “customer's” perspective. Regardless of whether women actually are or are just perceived to be more caring and nurturing by students and academic colleagues, being female allows for “a better relationship between students and administrator” (L4). As previously noted, this ultimately works to legitimise women's over-representation in these roles (also cf. 8.3).

In the following FG9 extract, Vanessa accounts for her own appointment as the result of managers' need to address an unusual situation, i.e. a student helpdesk staffed exclusively by male administrators:

Vanessa: I think if I was a boy I wouldn't have been hired... (1) cos they wanted a girl.. they needed a girl... they already had two boys.. so they needed to like.. mix it up.. with a girl
Aba: That'd be so odd having all three of you men there..
Mel: That [would be weird]
Aba: [that would be] really daunting.. like "oh are they all men" @
Vanessa: All similar as well.. in terms of race.. age [@]
All: [@]
Aba: That would be so odd like... I'd be like... "Why is there three white guys"=
Vanessa: ="Three white guys talking about Arsenal!"
All: @

(FG9)

FG9 participants do not seem to make sense of Vanessa's appointment as "discriminatory". They describe having three white men on the student helpdesk as 'odd', 'weird', and 'daunting', especially considering the female-dominated, ethnically diverse student population typical of the School they work in. The fact that these three white men are described as talking about football, often seen as a stereotypically male interest, works towards constructing them as not very 'approachable' – where being approachable is an essential quality of the ideal university administrator. Vanessa's appointment (allegedly also on the basis of her gender) is thus welcomed, and legitimised, as benefitting the students.

The association of women with caring is so engrained that it is used to account for their over-representation in the administration and management of specific disciplines, in turn defined as "caring". For example, women tend to be over-represented in the Health School administration team, L1 argues, because of 'sexist views of health as a caring profession.. [which] has to be done by women'. On the other hand, men reportedly tend to gravitate towards the administration of 'cooler', more "masculine" and male-dominated disciplines, such as business, economics, or science:

Pam: I think you said the guys that worked in Health... three of them have gone to the business school
Aba: It does look better on their CV doesn't it...
[...]
Vanessa: When I was at uni and the department I worked for.. even in my role that I was doing.. I was one of the very few females... because of the school I was in science so boys like it.. it's cool

(FG9)

L4: Actually when you think about the structure [...] maybe there are more women predominantly within the kind of.. psychology kind of.. positions? and.. have been allocated to a particular kind of student? whereas you've probably got more men? working in.. erm.. the harder sciences? like economics... I don't know that that was actually.. necessarily.. done on purpose but it certainly has fallen.. that way

As discussed in the next sub-section, another pattern in the construction of university admin as “women’s work” revolves around women’s allegedly natural or stereotypical superiority when it comes to multi-tasking and being organised.

8.2.2. The “women and multi-tasking” discourse

As with caring and communicating, so when talking about women’s allegedly superior organisational and multi-tasking skills, participants continuously shift between framing gender differences as real/natural and stereotypical/socially constructed. Either way, gendered skills/attributes and (perceptions of) gender-appropriate work are said to have material consequences on the recruitment of administrators:

Clerical workers do need to be.. organised and again I'm gonna massively stereotype here but... women are.. stereotypically better organised than men so maybe.. they feel like that's the job that they'd go into (M2)

In this example, women’s (stereo)typically superior organisational skills are, interestingly, mentioned not as potentially affecting recruiters’ decisions, but only as encouraging women to apply for these roles (and discouraging men, cf. Chapter 9).

(Perceptions of) Gendered skills are also said to influence who is (perceived as) competent once in post:

Well you could stereotypically say.. that women are multi-taskers and.. this job does involve multi-tasking.. and that men aren't as good as that and therefore they'd struggle to do it... (1) I don't know if I agree with that or not (M13)

Generally.. speaking I think women tend to.. multi-task a lot better... that's my.. - - it's what I see.. not to say that I can't but women tend to.. erm.. they can do a vast majority [*inaudible*] while with me especially I can do.. @ one thing at a time and slowly multi-task (Majid, FG8)

This is because I'm really sexist.. but I think that women are better... (1) organised.. (HH) and are better at multi-tasking? and I think that that has helped me in this job.. and I think maybe if I was a boy maybe I wouldn't be very good at it (Mel, FG9)

M13 voices doubts about (yet does not openly contest) what she defines as a stereotype. In FG8, Majid speaks of only being able to do one thing at a time, which he defines as ‘slowly multi-task[ing]’, *because* he is male. Mel expresses certainty as

to what makes her a good administrator: being a 'girl', because women are better organised and better at multi-tasking. Interestingly, she frames stating this as being sexist (cf. 8.3).

Those participants framing gender differences as stereotypes often contest the legitimacy of their influence on recruitment decisions or other day-to-day work practices. For example, three FG7 participants⁴⁵ explicitly contest the "women and multi-tasking" discourse via the use of humour and laughter:

Nikki: This sort of like.. idea that women are so great at multi-tasking
Priya: Ye:ah
Nikki: Cos they're like.. that's how women are you know
Efie: @
Nikki: They have kids! <@and they have this and they have this and they have all that@>... so it's like.. if you need a complicated thing done like a timetable.. everyone's like "we'll get a woman to do that"
All: @

(FG7)

Nikki points out that skills such as multi-tasking are socially constructed as gendered. She also sarcastically contests the link between disparate roles, such as mothering and timetabling, established by gendered stereotypes and assumptions.

Being able to multi-task is a skill required by the university administrator because they need to be able to do 'many bits and pieces' (Pam, FG9) often at the same time, troubleshoot and be a 'jack of all trades' (Vanessa, FG9, cf. 8.1.1). Not coincidentally, the jack of all trades is also discursively feminised by those participants who talk about women as being able to 'do everything':

Admin is to do everything.. and be able to do everything and that's what women do like... naturally.. and then the men.. they tend to be able to focus on something and say.. I'm [*chucking?*] everything else out of the window this time [...] that's not necessarily true in reality.. women can do that too.. but I think there's a general feel (Amala, FG2)

Chapter 9 discusses how discursively feminising the 'jack of all trades' is also used to account for the vertical gender imbalance, (as progression in HEA is made sense of as specialisation, cf. Chapters 7&9).

The next sub-section discusses participants' tendency to account for the over-representation of women in university admin roles in terms of the natural/socially constructed association between women and secretarial work.

⁴⁵ The fourth FG7 participant, Monica, consistently frames gender differences as natural, which leads to an argument with Nikki later on in the discussion.

8.2.3. The “secretaries are women” discourse

The association of secretarial work with women is so strong that, as L1 puts it, ‘secretaries are.. female.. <@by nature@> by... <@genetics@>’:

James: I guess it's quite an aspect of the job... (H) which is kind of considered secretarial.. which I think you would always.. you know rightly or wrongly.. consider to be more of a female.. erm kind of female position (FG1)

M2: Well a lot of the grade 2s and 3s are.. the secretary.. the course administrator.. you know those roles

Bev: I think the secretaries typists and receptionists is still a very.. female.. sounding role (FG5)

Participants often account for the over-representation of women in university generalist admin roles by foregrounding the secretarial aspect of these roles. This makes the feminisation of the ideal university admin worker seem almost obvious or, as L3 puts it, ‘common sense’:

I mean secretary.. receptionist... almost.. everything I've ever watched on television or anything.. you know.. would.. point me towards believing that secretaries are almost always women.. receptionists are almost always women.. do you know what I mean? I feel like that's something that you sort of are almost conditioned to.. you know it's like something you're brought up to.. erm.. - almost like.. common sense (L3)

Although clerical work started off (as did the vast majority of paid work) as a male occupation (cf. 3.1), Bev’s use of the adverb ‘still’ in the excerpt above implies that there is something historical, and taken-for-granted, about the perception of secretarial work as women’s work: in FG2, Amala also states that ‘admin has *always* been’ more of a ‘female’ role. In other words, “secretaries are women” is a gendered discourse so engrained that it has become common sense and shapes the way participants make sense of the horizontal imbalance in any (lower-level) administrative role, by making it seem obvious and harmless – just the way things are and have always been.

Unpacking the “secretaries are women” discourse, some participants account for the horizontal imbalance by constructing secretarial work as women’s manual labour; others establish a binary opposition between (working-class) men’s work in plumbing, a garage, or the construction industry, and women’s work as secretaries, mainly in the public sector:

Working-class [...] guys would be.. off to do plumbing and electrician erm.. you know bricklaying.. and the girls would go off to do.. [...] like I said NVQs clerical workers.. [...] when I worked at the council.. which is a bit similar to a university to a certain extent... you never.. saw a single... male apprentice.. come in it was always female and.. if they did quite well then the chances were they'd be recruited at this grade of level straight out of college (James, FG1)

Okay so I guess I'm.. a [*job title*] and a [*job title*] is.. effectively.. a PA.. and I guess a PA is effectively a secretary... so and a secretary is effectively a woman's <@job@> so that's that... when I started.. there weren't many [*job title*]s as far as I was aware of.. who were male... and people would be quite surprised... when I answered the phone that I was a man... (1) erm... (2) so I guess what their perception is.. is like saying.. (HHH).. if it's.. admin work... it's generally a woman's work if it's a man's work.. it's generally... manual labour (L7)

It is interesting to note that participants who entered HEA straight out of college or after NVQ courses are a small minority of the sample, the majority having 'fallen into it' (cf. Chapter 6) after graduating from university via temp jobs. A-levels and an undergraduate degree have become the essential educational requirements for G2 and G3 roles respectively. Nonetheless, these and other participants tend to account for the horizontal imbalance in terms of a gender binary between blue-collar (constructed as – working-class – men's work) and secretarial work (women's work by 'genetics', L1).

At times, a binary opposition is instead established between female secretaries and male engineers, bankers, technicians or managers (cf. Chapter 9 for further discussion), yet several participants fail to spell out the social and economic hierarchy between what is discursively and socially constructed as women's or men's work⁴⁶:

I do think that women do these sort of jobs more.. men... not so much.. in.. higher education administration in universities... I mean.. you see far more men... working in stocks and shares and things (M12)

There's a certain amount of men that go into more.. practical jobs.. so... you've already lost a few men there that move on that want to do... (1) sort of engineer-- you know eng- -- you know sort of like.. -- which shouldn't just be male but.. (HH) you know those.. sort of roles.. so then.. it does tend to leave... women to go for these sort of jobs... erm... (1) or maybe it's just unfortunately things have been done like.. PAs and secretaries are always seen as female (L5)

L5 in particular appears to construct these jobs as "residual": women apply for jobs left over from men's choices (Cohen, personal communication).

⁴⁶ Although cf. 9.1.1, which provides data examples where participants account for the imbalance in terms of the financial devaluation of university admin work.

Drawing on the “secretaries are women” discourse, some participants talk about certain university admin roles (e.g. PA/EA, faculty administration) as being more “female” than others (i.e. ‘programme administrator-type roles’, FG5):

Pauline: There's two almost different roles.. in universities there's the traditional secretary-PA-type role.. faculty administration and the Dean's Office.. and then.. roles like we do.. which is more.. admissions exams course office.. which is much more -- you get males entering... I haven't seen many males in the faculty administration-type roles

(FG8)

Amala: I guess admin has always been=

Anna: =It's more of a female job isn't it admin.. you say admin and you think more of a female role than a male role

Amala: Exactly.. But it was nice to see the men here actually.. the male PAs and male administrators in our team and... they do it! they can do it..

Kat: Absolutely!

Samya: I think actually PAs are obviously even more female than us

All: Yeah

Samya: That's really bad... yeah.. but it is.. like... why..

Kat: Coz you've got that image of the PA like.. the high heels..

All: Yeah

Amala: It's the coffee and..

(FG2)

In these excerpts, the “secretaries *are* women” discourse is used to account for the (allegedly) starker gender imbalance in “purely” secretarial (e.g. PA/EA) roles in HEA. That this discourse often ends up working to ideological effects (as defined in 4.1.2, cf. p.62) can be inferred by the variability in participants’ accounts. For example, before making the comparison between faculty administration and programme administration, and stating that ‘you get males entering’ the latter much more than the former, Pauline had just stated that the course admissions team (a programme administration team) is nine out of 10 female.

By foregrounding the secretarial aspect of university admin roles, participants can account for the over-representation of women in these roles without needing to go into much more detail, due to the common-sense character of the “secretaries *are* women” discourse. FG2 participants’ accounts of what makes secretaries ‘even more female’ than universities admin workers in general, i.e. the ‘high heels’ and ‘the coffee’ evoke the two common, stereotypical images of secretaries in popular discourse as critiqued by Pringle (1989; 1993; cf. 3.1): the heterosexually attractive ‘dolly bird’ and the deferential, subservient ‘office wife’. Talk about ‘good looks’ as being a tacit requirement of the more front-facing university admin jobs is a minor pattern in the data sets (e.g. FG2; FG6). Chapter 9 explores the deferential aspect typical of

secretarial work, the foregrounding of which is a more substantial pattern participants co-produce to account for the over-representation of women in lower-level university admin roles (i.e. the vertical imbalance).

The next section instead explores the effects of constructing the aforementioned gender differences in relation to caring, multi-tasking, communication and organisational skills as “actual/natural” or as stereotypical/socially constructed.

8.3. The horizontal gender imbalance in HEA: women’s merit or “positive discrimination”?

Within an overarching gender difference discourse, constructing women as better at caring, communicating and multi-tasking (and therefore as better university administrators) implies that men are “not good enough”. Several examples were provided in previous sub-sections showing how, when compared to women, men are talked about as lacking the patience, empathy and communication skills required to be a good administrator, to the point that training is tailored to make up for their (alleged) shortcomings:

We’ve actually got a course here called... “communication for men”! ... we do.. I’m not kidding (L6)

Men are not only talked about as not good enough, i.e. as doing the work poorly, once in post. They are also discursively constructed as “not good enough” when it comes to applying, being shortlisted and appointed in these roles, which is used to account for their under-representation. This is a regular pattern, co-produced by both female and male FG participants:

Calvin: One thing that’s funny is.. we’ve always asked.. the managers when they’d shortlisted how many.. men do you have.. can you employ them.. and often responses are “they’re shit!”

All: @

Calvin: Like the... calibre of.. the boys that have applied.. to.. the roles hasn’t been very good

(FG1)

Vanessa: I don’t know if you know that we’ve hired five new grade 2s [in our school]

Aba: [They’re all women] aren’t they

Vanessa: They’re all women

Aba: @

Vanessa: And all the shortlisted candidates were women. and quite a few men did apply but they just didn’t.. get shortlisted.. for various reasons either they just -- they wrote really poorly on the application or they didn’t have the academic requirements or.. silly things sometimes you get eliminated for don’t you.. but.. like

you know.. you do need your Bachelors even though you don't really necessarily probably need one but
 All: No
 Vanessa: Stuff like that [...] but.. they didn't even get down to the shortlist with any men

(FG9)

It is also a pattern in the interview data set, and therefore in managers' talk:

- M13: For a grade 2 or a grade 3 you want people that can articulate themselves well and explain themselves well and I think.. sometimes women have a better way of doing that sometimes than men? [...] they have come across better and answered.. better at questions and.. generally... have done... better in interview.. than the men
- M9: Quite a few blokes applied for [*the role*] but when you look at their CV.. you just think... no... don't have the experience da da da.. so I think if you.. go down to the nitty-gritty.. of it.. not one man was shortlisted... (H) I felt bad... and my.. colleagues said.. "make sure you bring a bloke in this time" and I'm like [...] "let's find one at least.. it'd be nice at least to interview one".. but when we were shortlisting.. they weren't matching to the criteria.. of the job
- M3: Well I guess it's about if.. women.. or .. men.. apply for these types of roles [...] actually you know.. recently.. we've been shortlisting.. and unfo-- you know generally.. the men.. just don't even feature on... -- and that is down to... (1) the application.. so... it's about.. how much time they spent on it? did they wanna do it? are they just hedging their bets [...] and that's not necessarily just men.. that's anyone

Generally speaking, the underrepresentation of men in generalist admin roles is accounted for in terms of their being "not good enough" at application or interviewing stage: men just do not 'match to the criteria of the job', they do not have the 'experience' required, 'they do not write well enough', they do not 'articulate themselves' well when answering interview questions and so on.

Blaming men for their shortcomings is a recurrent way to account for the horizontal imbalance in terms of meritocracy, thus discursively erasing the possibility that this could be the result of gender bias in the application and recruitment process. It cannot be stressed enough that this project does not aim to point the finger at individuals. Rather, it aims to critique the potentially ideological effects of discursive patterns collectively produced by participants to account for the imbalance, in order to promote discursive change. Whenever women and men are talked about as different, and their differences as "actual" or natural, the overrepresentation of women in lower-level generalist admin roles is legitimised as the outcome of essential and unchangeable gender differences. Women simply deserve to be overrepresented,

because they *are* better at selection stage and they *are* better administrators once in post. In other words, if women have an advantage over men, this is “natural”, not discriminatory:

I think it's hard to compare though... cos there's not a lot of... (1) well.. there are some guys in my position.. but there's not a lot? so sometimes I kind of think.. as a girl I'm better organised -- I mean maybe there will be guys that are organised as well.. but I just kind of think that.. overall.. that's how I feel.. but also you can't compare to many guys to see how being a woman has... (1) put you in... advantage (Mel, FG9)

Mel frames her allegedly superior organisational and multi-tasking skills as natural, i.e. as part of her nature as a woman. She thus does not appear to make sense of her lack of male colleagues as evidence of gender-biased recruitment practices but, rather, as merit-based. The ideological use of an (apparently gender-neutral, in fact gendered) meritocracy discourse to legitimise the gender-imbalanced status quo is further discussed in relation to the vertical gender imbalance in 10.3.

As previously noted (cf. 8.2), participants often shift between framing gender differences as actual or natural and as perceptions, expectations or stereotypes. It was argued that, either way, they end up feminising the ideal university admin worker, thus accounting for the horizontal imbalance. This variability has, nevertheless, different implications in terms of opportunities for action and change. Talking about gender differences as stereotypes has, on the one hand, potentially emancipatory effects: it is sometimes used by participants to contest the legitimacy of the current gender imbalance by constructing it as the outcome of gender-biased recruitment or promotion practices (cf. FG7 extract on p.165 and Chapter 9). As this can open up opportunities for action and (discursive) change, examples where participants contest the gender differences discourse and/or the legitimacy of the gender imbalance in HEA and at CSU are flagged up throughout this thesis and in the conclusion (cf. 12.2).

When gender differences are framed as stereotypical, instead, women's overrepresentation in university admin is made sense of as the result of gender bias at recruitment stage. This is in turn often framed as “positive discrimination” in favour of women, or “female advantage”:

Mel: I do think that men.. would have a disadvantage when [...] applying for a job maybe.. when they're being interviewed.. I don't know why.. but I just feel women have an advantage over men.. particularly for.. these types of roles and I think that's because people have that perception of.. who they who they think should be an administrator and who shouldn't be

(FG9)

- Gabby: Do you think there are other reasons why so many women and so few men are doing.. these jobs in universities
- Rachel: I would think men would get turned down from them.. but that's going back to my thing that I've noticed.. I think the assumption will be that a woman would be better at that.. so there's positive discrimination in appointing I think
- Nick: Yeah that's true.. if I saw an advert for a secretary I wouldn't expect to get it if I applied for it there are certain jobs which.. are still in people's -- most people's minds done by a particular gender
(FG6)

Because of “people’s” (i.e. managers’) perceptions of ‘who should be an administrator and who shouldn’t be’, women are said to experience ‘positive discrimination’ in these roles. The horizontal imbalance is accounted for as the result of “female advantage”, and being overrepresented is made sense of as a positive thing for women.

Conversely, gender stereotypes and assumptions are constructed as working *against* men: by drawing on a “poor men” discourse, men are constructed as the sex being discriminated against (a tendency also noted in Gill et al., 2017; cf. Chapter 11):

- L3: That is strange isn't it because.. you could almost... look at that and be like.. -- as a bloke I could be quite shocked and could be like "oh actually.. women are getting all the jobs here" @ [...] from my experience here... generally.. quite a lot of.. females in sort of.. senior roles.. so I've almost sometimes I suppose seen it as being an advantage.. or a disadvantage to be.. perhaps.. a guy.. if you're trying to get to like.. a team leader role [*i.e.* G4/G5]
- Camille: But even before that. how many males would apply to the job we saw... before... it would be interesting to see the percentage of that..
- Jodie: Yeah it might not be seen as a welcoming environment to -- I don't know it might be quite difficult to go into a... workplace where your.. gender is in the minority...
- Camille: You'd have to break the stereotype
(FG3)

Men are constructed as being disadvantaged or discriminated against in HEA: women reportedly get ‘all the jobs’ (at the bottom and in almost gender-balanced middle-management). The 30-50% of women in senior roles is reframed by L3 as ‘quite a lot’. HEA is thus constructed as a “female-dominated” environment, perceived as potentially ‘unwelcoming’ for men as a ‘minority’ (FG3 – a reason rarely if ever mentioned when talking about women allegedly not applying for higher-grade jobs). Even when the gender imbalance in senior roles is acknowledged, the predominance of women in lower-level jobs and their relatively good representation in middle-management roles is still framed as a sign of men’s disadvantage. For example, M11

speaks of managers over-recruiting women because they are 'thinking of levelling the balance out'.

This study is interested in all aspects of the gender imbalance in HEA, including men's underrepresentation in lower-level admin roles as the "other side" of women's over-representation (cf. 1.1). However, drawing on Gill's (2004) notion of 'critical respect' (cf. 4.1.1) participants' tendency to account for the horizontal imbalance in terms of "female advantage" or "positive discrimination" must be critiqued. Framing women's overrepresentation in lower-level admin roles as a sign of gendered favouritism can work to ideological effects:

I used to work at.. [School] and it actually was [...] really flipped over the other way... definitely about the male.. heads of School on the academic side... all male.. but administratively.. it favoured women... so women stood a better chance of getting a job down at the bottom [*bangs hand on the table*] cos I think they're viewed as more.. whatever.. women don't get bored.. as quickly as a man.. he would have other ambitions or whatever seemed to be the background thinking.. but that even went up to the next level because women [*bangs hand on the table*] are good or were seen to be good to at managing women... and in that environment. there were more women.. up to the middle management [...] thankfully it's changed now because management has changed but it was exactly that prejudice.. in favour of .. women (Rachel, FG6)

Standing 'a better chance of getting a job down at the bottom', i.e. being over-represented in lower-level, discursively devalued work (cf. Chapter 6), work with reportedly few development and progression opportunities (cf. Chapter 7), and work that men allegedly get bored with because they have higher ambitions (cf. Chapter 9), can hardly be considered as a sign of advantage (a point also made by Cameron 2000a&b in relation to call centre workers). Discursively constructing this as "positive discrimination" or "female advantage" works to ideological effects: it shifts the focus away from women's under-representation (and male advantage) when it comes to better-paid, more prestigious work in a female-dominated, (allegedly) "female-friendly" sector such as HEA (cf. Chapters 9 & 10 for further discussion).

8.4. Conclusion

Participants talk about university admin work as requiring communication/people skills, customer service/care skills, organisational skills, patience, the ability to multi-task and be a "jack of all trades", resilience and flexibility. Local, situated discourses about generalist admin work and workers thus appear to recycle institutional discourse to a certain degree (cf. Appendix C). On the other hand, more emphasis is given to the (hidden) emotional labour requirements and related skills/personal attributes such as patience and empathy in the FG data set, and on confidence in

managers' talk. Administrators should be confident communicators, confident working independently and taking initiative, and confident enough to be 'willing to muck in' (M2), in that no task should feel as though it were beneath them.

Despite talking about the "good" university administrator in apparently gender-neutral terms, when explicitly prompted to talk about perceptions of gendered work in HEA or the gender imbalance, participants tend to construct a feminised ideal university admin worker. This is a tendency across both data sets (and is supported by theoretical and empirical scholarship, cf. Chapter 3). The skills that were deemed essential to be a good generalist administrator in the first half of the focus groups/interviews are later in the research encounters reframed as gendered, by drawing on an overarching gender differences discourse. Sub-discourses of this gender differences discourse, a "women as carers", "women as superior communicators", "women and multi-tasking" and "secretaries are women" discourses are deployed by participants to construct women as (stereo)typically better university administrators than men, thus accounting for the horizontal gender imbalance in HEA.

Participants draw on elements of the same gendered discourses that Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2015) traced in their own interview data when researching occupational sex segregation within the cultural and creative industries. As UK higher education is arguably part of what Walby (2009), amongst others, calls 'the knowledge economy' (alongside the cultural and creative industries), it is perhaps not surprising that the 'gender dynamics' allocating work by sex are similar in both sectors. These 'gender dynamics' work to relegate women to what is discursively constructed as less "creative", less specialised work.

The variability in participants' accounts, i.e. framing gender differences around caring, communicating, multi-tasking and being organised as "actual/natural" or stereotypes/assumptions, works to sometimes only apparently different effects. When gender differences are framed as actual/natural, the horizontal imbalance in HEA is legitimised as merit-based. Women are constructed as better than men at this type of work, and therefore as rightly over-represented. Conversely, men are constructed as "not good enough": they do not apply for these roles, and when they do, they do not get shortlisted, let alone appointed; the few who make it through recruitment are generally talked about as doing the work poorly once in post. A gendered "them and us" opposition is thus discursively created by participants between female (good) and male (bad) administrators, further explored in Chapter 9. Framing gender differences as "actual" legitimises the imbalance as the "natural" outcome of unchangeable gender differences, thus denying the existence of gender inequality and closing down opportunities for change.

When the existence of “natural” gender differences is contested, the horizontal gender imbalance is accounted for as the outcome of gender-biased recruitment practices, based on gender stereotypes/assumptions. As women are said to be over-recruited in these roles, the legitimacy of the imbalance is challenged. This can potentially open up opportunities for action and change. However, by framing gender-biased recruitment practices as working to women’s *advantage*, some participants in turn construct men as the sex being discriminated against (the “poor men” discourse, also cf. Chapter 11). It was claimed that the construction of men as the disadvantaged sex in HEA ultimately works ideologically to shift the focus away from the vertical gender imbalance, and from the fact that men’s underrepresentation in these roles is counterbalanced by their relative overrepresentation in more prestigious, better paid work.

The next chapter further develops the claim that, far from being a sign of “female advantage”, women’s overrepresentation in university admin work is another manifestation of gender inequality – the other side of their under-representation in senior roles. It does so by illustrating how women are constructed as better at work which is simultaneously discursively devalued as boring, mundane, unimportant, invisible, passive, demeaning, akin to housework, non-work. Put differently, it explores the gender devaluation of university admin work, how this is used to account for the vertical gender imbalance but not made sense of as a manifestation of gender inequality.

Chapter 9. The Gendered Devaluation of University Admin Work

In Chapter 8, participants' framing of women's over-representation in lower-level university admin work as a sign of "female advantage" was critiqued as working to ideological effects (as defined in 4.1.2, p.62). It was argued that constructing men as the disadvantaged sex in HEA works to shift the focus away from the vertical gender imbalance, i.e. from the fact that men are relatively over-represented in more prestigious and better paid roles. This was discussed as discursively closing down opportunities for action and change.

This chapter aims to further develop this claim. Section 9.1 illustrates how, when accounting for the vertical gender imbalance, participants tend to reframe the devaluation of university admin work as gendered, i.e. as cause and effect of its being (constructed as) "women's work". Section 9.2 discusses how men are talked about as being, seeing themselves or being considered by others as "too good" for devalued women's work like university admin, and simultaneously as more suitable for 'bigger and better jobs' (M13; university management, leadership and technical/specialised work). The discursive tension between constructing men as "too good" and at the same time as "not good enough" (cf. 8.3) to work in university admin is here interpreted as an ideological dilemma which participants navigate by reasserting the gendered devaluation of university admin work. Finally, Section 9.3 explores the gendered "them and us" divide in HE(A), as it manifests itself in episodes of gender-differential treatment told by participants.

9.1. Gendering the devaluation of university admin work

This section unpacks the interplay between the discursive devaluation (cf. Chapter 6) and the discursive feminisation (cf. 8.2) of university admin work. Put differently, the focus of this section is on participants' tendency, when asked to account for the vertical gender imbalance, to reframe the devaluation of university admin work from gender-neutral to being cause and effect of its being "women's work". The over-representation of women in university admin is consistently accounted for as the result of the devaluation of these roles as easy, routine, mundane and lower-paid (cf. 9.1.1); as boring, passive, invisible work (cf. 9.1.2); as work which involves supporting, assisting and serving others, i.e. housework, almost non-work (9.1.3). University admin ends up being constructed as socially devalued work that only women are said to be 'happy' to do, or able to 'just get on with' (Samya, FG2).

9.1.1. The typing pool stereotype

As previously noted (cf. 8.2), when asked about perceptions of gendered work in HEA participants regularly establish a gendered binary opposition between women in admin and men in management/leadership/manual/technical work (for a discussion of the latter, cf. 9.2). Sometimes (though not always, cf. 8.2.1), participants explicitly articulate the hierarchical relationship and different social value attributed to men's and women's work in HEA:

Kat: I think they think we are paper shufflers [...] in university administration.. people think that men are the ones... you know at the top.. doing all the academic important [...] stuff.. and like I said we're just the envelope stuffers..
All: @
Samya: We're kind of just doing the letters and <@filing@> (FG2)

Aba: @ more of the secretarial erm.. the data entry.. you know like.. very basic kind of mundane roles I would.. think that people would see that to be a women you know.. centred kind of role.. whereas.. men is more of the.. managerial and authoritative (FG9)

M12: I thought [*university administration*] was for like [...] middle-aged women.. standing around with cups of tea... a bit like the doctor's receptionists.. I didn't think it was.. a particularly important job

These examples illustrate how participants collectively establish a gendered “them and us” opposition (cf. 9.3 for further discussion) between female administrators doing easy, unskilled, mundane work and male (academic) managers doing the ‘important stuff’.

The devaluation of university admin is not only discursively gendered when talking about perceptions. It is regularly drawn upon to account for the vertical gender imbalance:

Gabby: If you focus on grade 2.. why so many women and why so few men..
Priya: Because those have been [...] picking-up-the-phone sort of roles (FG7)

Rachel: They're.. day-to-day jobs aren't they of like.. doing stuff day-to-day without being ambitious without any ambitions for an interesting life apart from .. getting interested in your daily life and the people you meet and that kind of.. thing.. and not=

Beck: =and no managerial roles

Rachel: Not managerial not developmental not.. intellectual necessarily.. I know there will be some... jobs in there but... (2) it's more.. day to day happiness with your day-to-day routine rather than having... ideas... beyond them [...] they don't want someone who's gonna.. have ideas.. they just want someone.. just to get on and scan the library books

Beck: <@without causing a revolution@>

Rachel: <@no revolution just stamp.. books!@> (FG6)

Stacey: Well obviously it's quite mundane? being clerical is probably just inputting information into a system

Bev: Yes.. data entry

Stacey: And they [*i.e. men*] don't think it is worthwhile..

Yokow: They'd rather not work than do these jobs (FG5)

Participants make sense of the overrepresentation of women in lower-level, generalist university admin as part and parcel of its construction as easy, mundane, unimportant work. University admin is work that men are said not to consider as worthwhile so do not apply for (cf. 9.2 for further discussion); work that is considered as so routine and dull that employers need someone (*i.e.* a woman) who has no ambition and will just get on with it. What Williams defined as our 'cultural overvaluation of men and devaluation of women' (1993b: 7) is very much at play, albeit often sarcastically, in (female) FG participants' ways to make sense of the vertical imbalance.

The gendered devaluation of university admin work as easy, dull, mundane women's work is also achieved via a rhetorical move often made by participants, male and female, to account for the gender imbalance. This move, further critiqued in 10.2, consists of answering about *mothers* when asked to account for the overrepresentation of *women* in university admin. Women-as-mothers' over-representation in admin roles is then explained in terms of their need for "easy work", to be able to cope with their occupational as well as family life. According to this patterned account, university admin *must* be easy work if there are so many women(-as-mothers) doing it. In FG6, Beck insightfully talks about what she defines as a persistent 'typing pool' stereotype in HE:

There's a bit of a typing pool.. kind of stereotype you know... that women do admin at a lower grade.. basically.. secretaries.. and are sometimes treated as such.. that they're doing that because that's the kind of work that women do alongside their family life or whatever.. -- I don't think that's particularly true at CSU... I think in general [...] that's still hanging over.. that still exists (Beck, FG6)

Beck uses an extremely loaded metaphor to account for the vertical gender imbalance at CSU and in HEA. The typing pool stereotype evokes a segregation of women into lower-level, devalued, unskilled, dead-end jobs, as well as a physical segregation from the rest of the office/university. This metaphor vividly accounts for the way female administrators are sometimes treated as a material consequence of the gendered devaluation of their work.

Work in the typing pool has been compared by scholars to assembly-line work in factories (cf. Chapter 3). Despite being “white-collar” office work, university admin is often constructed as women’s “manual labour” in the data sets (also cf. 8.2):

I'd probably typify administration with... a factory -- a working-class type of role.. because it is a lot of like.. repetitive stuff.. and things come in cycles and lot of data entry.. but.. then it hasn't shifted.. gender-wise in the same way (Calvin, FG1)

As ‘a working-class type of role’, university admin is constructed as easy, unskilled work (e.g. data entry) that does not require any specific educational qualifications. Although most entry-level university admin jobs require candidates to have A-levels if not undergraduate degrees, this is omitted whenever participants account for the current gender imbalance in terms of ‘the lack of educational opportunities that [*women*] had when they were younger’ (Peter, FG3) or in the past (cf. Chapter 10), or whenever they construct university admin as women’s ‘manual labour’.

There are no instances of male participants *explicitly* accounting for the overrepresentation of women in university admin in terms of its devaluation as easy, routine, unskilled work. Nevertheless, the *financial* devaluation of university admin work (arguably linked to its being devalued as easy, routine, unskilled work) is often drawn upon by male and female participants to account for the gender imbalance as the inevitable outcome of “traditional” gender roles within the heteronormative family. Within this “traditional” world view, financially-devalued university admin jobs are suitable for women as mothers and secondary earners, but are not paid well enough for men to be able to fulfil their role as “breadwinners”:

Peter: I think... bringing in the.. stereotypical roles... within that the family unit or whatever the males... have historically always been seen as the breadwinners.. and if you look at the clerical or admin-type roles... the pay that goes along with them is.. sometimes not.. as high as what that male.. or that family unit needs in order to.. live so therefore the male then is potentially forced into something like the private sector where.. they become an investment banker or.. whatever because they can then make.. the big bucks... and that then allows the female then to.. take=

Camille: =to relax!

Peter: Yeah you know so...

Camille: @

Peter: So so so then.. that allows the female to still spend time and gaining that flexibility.. and the work-life balance with the children with the family and whatever so.. I think again unfortun-- you know it goes back to those... roles... I know I know that there obviously are -- what's that.. the modern family or whatever.. where the roles are reversed and the female is the breadwinner and the man stays at home and.. so it.. works for.. whichever way it works with the individual family unit you know but I think maybe historically that's why there seems to be a bit more.. females within those areas

because potentially maybe it's linked with... earning potential
whereas the males might be looking to -- wanting to earn more..
so they can provide more

(FG3)

Peter interestingly frames men's entry into higher-paid banking jobs as 'forced' upon them by their traditional role as breadwinners. University admin jobs, on the other hand, *allow* "the female", in the heteronormative, "traditional" family, to be more flexible and spend time with the children. Camille interrupts Peter to point how his account implies that women are able to 'relax' while men go to work to make 'the big bucks'. At this point, Peter distances himself from this "traditional" worldview by constructing it as 'historical' and 'unfortunate' (a frequent trend in male participants' accounts, cf. Chapter 10) and hedging his claim ('maybe'; 'there seems to be'; 'potentially'). He also makes a concession: the existence of the modern family, where gender roles are reversed. However, this concession is made only to strengthen the previous point (as concessions usually are, Antaki & Wetherell, 1999).

Stereotypical gender roles are consistently invoked to account for the vertical gender imbalance. At times however, as in the following excerpts, participants appear to contest the financial devaluation of university admin work and of the "gendered" skill-set required to do it well:

Skills like empathy are very undervalued? [...] <@and quite significantly underpaid@> [...] we know that you get more... pay in the finance industry.. we could number-crunch too [...] but if that's not played to our skills set.. or to the kind of role we wanna do.. we're ending up in... lower-paid job.. because our skills aren't as valued as highly (Victoria, FG4)

I would put money on the fact that all of these roles are paid much less than the roles that have more men in them [...] We can talk all day over whether or not it's natural for women to have a certain kind of work.. but it's not natural for it to be worthless.. and it doesn't make sense that these jobs are all the lowest paid jobs at the university... even if we put arguments aside for a second.. and say we do have a specifically female skill-set.. there's no reason why that's worth less money... and.. why we can't be in charge of things with that skill-set (Nikki, FG7)

When someone trains in IT or.. software development.. they're never [*grade*] 2 or 3 are they (L5)

The financial devaluation of admin work is a material, socially-constructed consequence of its gendered devaluation. In turn, it contributes to sustaining the status quo both in the microcosm of HEA as well as in society at large. Men-dominated roles (e.g. IT) have higher starting salaries and grades, cause and effect of men's roles as breadwinners. Financially-devalued admin roles are in turn

constructed as suitable for women (or, rather, women-as-mothers) in that women are, and will therefore remain, secondary earners.

Within this participant co-constructed (though sometimes contested) heteronormative worldview, where “traditional” gender roles are used to account for the imbalance, women-as-mothers and secondary earners are constructed as being “happy” to stay in lower-paid admin roles. Men, partly pushed by social pressures to be breadwinners and by their ‘cultural overvaluation’ (Williams, 1993b: 7) vis-à-vis the (financial) devaluation of admin work, are said to get bored and quickly move on (i.e. leave or move up). The next section explores the apparently gender-differential ability to cope with boring work, part of an overarching gender difference discourse which participants draw upon to account for the vertical gender imbalance.

9.1.2. Passivity vs. activity: women stay, men get bored and move on/up

An element of the discursive devaluation of university admin work is its construction as boring, dull, even mind-numbing work (cf. Chapter 6). The overrepresentation of women in lower-level admin work is recurrently accounted for in terms of women’s (stereo)typical patience (cf. 8.2.1) and willingness to ‘just get on with it’ (Samya, FG2):

- L3: It's a job that perhaps... more men sort of drift in and out of.. whereas women would be more inclined to sort of stick with it
- Aba: What I've noticed [...] is.. more men are likely to not last.. or spend more time in admin.. they would just come for the experience.. and probably move on to something else.. whereas women.. tend to be more.. stable.. and tend to just stay in that role [...]
- Pam: So I wonder if that's a confidence issue or whether.. men are more easily promotable than women or.. I don't know
- (FG9)

Women’s reported tendency to ‘stick with it’ is in turn accounted for in ambiguous, sometimes negative terms, and always by drawing on an overarching gender differences discourse. Women are said to be more responsible and mature than men, who are instead constructed as ambitious, competitive risk-takers (e.g. L3, FG2, FG4, M13). Oftentimes, it is women’s alleged lack of confidence, as in the FG9 extract above, that is cited as the main reason behind women’s stagnation in these devalued jobs (also cf. 9.2.1).

This gender-differential ability to cope with boring work is again framed as either “actual” and/or stereotypical. Either way, participants tend to account for the current imbalance, both horizontal and vertical, in terms of this gendered binary opposition playing a role in recruitment decisions:

I've heard people say "we want a woman for this role.. because she'll pay more attention to it" or.. "he'll get bored" (L6)

I'm just wondering if senior people maybe think that women are more likely to sort of.. stay... remain.. in the sort of.. say grade 3 roles.. and therefore.. perhaps might be a better long-term resource investment.. perhaps they think that men.. are more likely to sort of.. move on perhaps and... going back to what we were saying.. perhaps it's more of a stopgap (L3)

Interestingly, entering university admin is reframed as a 'stopgap' exclusively for men (though cf. 6.2). Again, men's underrepresentation in these roles is constructed as a sign of disadvantage or discrimination at recruitment stage:

Samya: I can imagine a guy having a disadvantage..
Kat: At lower grades yeah I think so.. I think they think you could get bored... definitely.. I think they probably... take women over men at that level
(FG2)

Rachel: I've spoken to recruiters who just said that right out.. they don't want a man... well coz they don't want them to be ambitious.. and they don't=
Beck: =they don't want them to leave they want them to stay
(FG6)

When it comes to talking about progression, the same gendered binary is reframed (even by the same participants) as working to men's advantage:

Samya: I can imagine a guy being encouraged to apply for processes because it's like... he's bored poor thing you know! with doing just admin and so he gets kind of... -- whereas a woman would probably just get on with it
(FG2)

Rachel: I've found in all of these environments an expectation that a woman would be happier... just pottering on quite happily.. but a man will need @ more of a challenge and after a given number of years will get fed up and leave.. so... what I've noticed about the men I've worked with [...] is that men are.. either promoted up within a few years.. so as not to lose them.. or the decision is taken we don't like them anyway so we'll leave them where they are and then they will leave of their own accord whereas.. women tend to be seen as though they will stay for twenty years and at grade 3 and be happy
(FG6)

Men are not "let in" (either because they're "not good enough" or because they are discriminated against, cf. 8.3). If they manage to get in, they are quickly "pushed upwards". Participants thus appear to make sense of the vertical gender imbalance as an effect of the 'glass escalator' (Williams, 1992, cf. Chapter 3; though cf. 9.2.3 for competing accounts). For example, male administrators are said to be offered those

'little opportunities that are not opened out to the whole team' (Rachel, FG6), which will eventually help them argue their case for promotion, to be encouraged to aim higher and be part of the 'boys' club':

I genuinely believe that women are not encouraged in the same way.. as men to... progress [...] there just seems to be that sort of... [...] championing -- you know.. expectation even.. males would want to.. progress and be given more seniority.. whereas females.. are more happy to stay... at the level that they're at.. and don't necessarily want to progress (M1)

When I started I got taken on at the same time as somebody else who was.. male and... sometimes he and my.. grade 8 and grade 9 would go out and have a drink?... like having a drink out at the pub with these guys who were all on really high pay grades... they were clearly just doing it because they were the men in the office.. and I was sort of thinking [...] when the time comes for one of us to move up.. we're gonna have me or this person who's been out to the pub with them loads of times! [...] now you're all buddies... <@and I'm.. being left in the office@> (Nikki, FG7)

Sometimes there is a bit of a boys' club? [...] you go upstairs? ... men sitting there with beer.. why haven't they invited the women [...] and that's fine because.. I don't drink beer but.. it's that kind of... (1) knowledge-sharing as well?.. you feel that you don't.. often know something because it's... (HH) -- even my manager for example.. he naturally deviates to the male.. grade 7 (M3)

Being part of the 'boys' club', these and other female participants argue, can translate into material advantages for men's careers in HEA (though cf. 9.2.3).

Participants produce competing accounts, constructing men's alleged tendency to get bored as both a disadvantage (in recruitment) and an advantage (for progression). This variability has the ultimate effect of discursively pushing men out of university admin jobs and simultaneously hindering female administrators' progression. This is achieved by reframing the aforementioned assumption that G2/G3 administrators do not want to progress (cf. 7.1.3, pp.138-139) as gendered, i.e. as applying exclusively to female administrators. Only women, and especially women-as-mothers and older women, are (reportedly) assumed to be "happy" to stay in these "boring" jobs, whereas male administrators will want to move on/up:

It just does depend on... where they [*women*] are in their own lives it could be that they're raising children it could be that.. they've been in the role for so long they reach that time and age and actually they don't have ... that need to want to progress? they're quite happy in their current roles and.. especially an older woman is more likely to stay in that role.. when you reach a certain age and you don't have that drive -- it's not true of everyone but it's true of a number of people [...] whereas [...] obviously it's not impossible but... men are less likely?.. to stay in that role?.. for that length of time? (Jasmin, FG4)

The "women stay, men move on/up" binary is part of a broader, traditionally gendered opposition: (female) passivity vs. (male) activity. Drawing on the passivity vs.

activity binary is a less substantial, yet interesting, pattern in the data set, one that tends to characterise male participants' talk about perceptions of university admin as "women's work":

- James I think one of the perceptions for people who.. don't work in the job.. and pa-pa-part of the reason that possibly it's seen as.. sort of more female.. -- it's that.. sort of for wanting a better word.. I think it'd be perceived as quite a passive job? it's not really a job.. although it is actually sometimes -- we do make quite a lot of decisions ourselves.. I think when you kind of say admin or administration.. you know some people would tell you that.. you're doing the job well if you're not really seen.. I mean for me I would think the.. more traditionally male job as more of a decision-taker or manager or sort of leader and.. it may sound a bit old-fashioned.. I mean it is.. and it's not necessarily my.. feel.. it's how people outside of it might perceive it... whereas the job of an administrator is -- you're kind of like at the beck and call of.. the students to a certain extent.. the academics.. you don't really have.. such a great deal of coming into.. your job sometimes..
- Calvin: If you're a good administrator you're sort of invisible.. a lot of male... traditional male roles.. you're.. making an impact you're being seen and you're being outspoken and it's=
- James: =Like you said it's quite an... active maybe job whereas.. an administrator it is kind of passive..
- Calvin: If you're doing a good job.. you don't get noticed cos everything is working

(FG1)

In their co-constructed account, James and Calvin make noticeable discursive effort to hedge and distance themselves from their claims: it is worth remembering that this account is being produced as an answer to me, a former female administrator. The traditional role of the silent, passive, almost invisible administrator (cf. 2.1) is here feminised on the basis of the "traditional" gendered binary activity vs. passivity.

As invisible work which only gets noticed when it is not done well or at all, university admin is talked about in terms reminiscent of housework, i.e. as the housekeeping of universities (also cf. Eveline, 2004). The next section illustrates how participants tend to construct university admin work as caring for, supporting, serving others, and as requiring those who do it to blur the boundaries between home and work, between assistance and personal assistance.

9.1.3. University admin as housework

Framing university admin as the housekeeping of universities is a recurrent pattern in all-female FGs. These participants argue that, like housework, university admin is mostly done by women and devalued as invisible, unskilled, "non-work":

- Samya: We quite like this sort of little tidy... -- it's almost like an extension of the home isn't it.. you kind of tidying..
[...]
- Amala: I don't know if it's something to do with natural women's role... I mean they're mothers.. they're naturally organized.. they naturally have to look after... the home.. and everything.. basically... erm... and these kinds of roles tend to... need that as well.. they need to look after everything without the man.. or the manager knowing.. realising how much of an important role or task that is
- Kat: I think also.. they're quite comfortable jobs you know.. you come in.. you get to sit down.. I mean.. I hate to sound so stereotypical.. but you know.. have a cup of tea.. talk to your colleagues.. you know... there's that kind of... like... it's almost like a little family isn't it.. and I think.. women.. I mean I personally really like that about... -- I'd hate to work by myself..
- Samya: Yeah.. probably not an intimidating environment.
- Katerina: Yeah.. it's not a corporate kind of thing
[...]
- Amala: So it's more homely.. it's almost a bit homely

(FG2)

The boundaries between home and work are blurred in the admin office, constructed as an 'extension of the home', 'a bit homely', 'almost like a little family': a place where you get to sit down and have a cup of tea with your colleagues after doing some tidying/filing. These are elements of the afore-mentioned discursive construction of HEA as a "female-friendly" sector, as opposed to the male-dominated corporate world of work. If looking after the home and the family is made sense of as 'natural women's role', because women 'are mothers', then university admin is women's work because it reflects women's/mothers' role within the home and requires the same skills.

As Eveline (2004) also observes, generalist administrators' work as housekeeping often goes unrecognised and unrewarded. In the FG2 excerpt above, university admin work is constructed as invisible women's (house)work which the man/manager does not notice and, therefore, is unlikely to consider as worthy of development and progression. This is an example of how, as previously noted, G2/G3 administrators' lack of progression ends up being reframed as a "gender issue". The 'leap', as participants define it, between G3 and G4 (and/or G5) roles becomes conceptually gendered: it is reframed as a leap between admin and management as discursively gendered, hierarchically-positioned types of work.

Within this gendered work hierarchy, again mapped onto "traditional" gender roles in the home/university, serving, supporting and assisting others is women's work:

- Samya: Women are more likely to be... personal assistants to the academics whereas a guy would be like.. "no, actually.. my job doesn't involve that".. whereas we're happy to blur down those boundaries?

Anna: Yeah I totally agree coz obviously first-hand I've seen male administrators [...] say "sorry that's not my job" whereas if it was me, I'd have said... yeah absolutely I'll help!
(FG2)

Bev: It's just that word... just that.. support word of assistant.. slightly [derogatory isn't it]

Yokow: [you'd do anything...] type of thing
(FG5)

In the first extract above, women's alleged willingness to 'blur down those boundaries' is constructed as something which men are allegedly "not good enough" at doing (cf. 8.3). Women thus end up being constructed as better university administrators because of their alleged willingness to support and serve (cf. 3.3; Tyler & Taylor 2001). In the second extract, this "advantage" appears to be problematized, as the 'derogatory' aspect of it is foregrounded: this is subservient, deferential work, work requiring a certain degree of willingness to be demeaned – hence it is done by women (Nixon, 2009, cf. 3.3, also cf. 9.2.1).

As an act of deference as well as housework, making and serving tea/coffee is an example often cited by participants as the symbol of the historical gendered devaluation of university admin work:

I've heard.. stories from colleagues.. who started here decades ago a:nd.. they had to make the tea:s .. and the coffee:s ... and.. they had to call.. Sir and Madam and whatever.. all very formal.. so kind of being a.. PA servant... something like that [...] arranging agendas buying presents for... (HH) you know the wife's birthday or whatever.. and it's been evolving.. but.. it takes forever to change societies and mindsets (L1)

Although the "office wife" role of decades ago might have 'evolved' (i.e. become less gendered) into today's administrative and secretarial occupations (cf. 3.1; Truss et al, 2013), lower-level administrators still carry out devalued "women's work". Some administrators, not all, are still required to serve tea and coffee, and arrange diaries:

M3: I've been asked myself "oh there's some.. external visitor or something.. can you go and make a cup of tea?" .. I have to wonder? would a man have been asked to do the same thing?

Laura: But that—erm.. do you ever get a joke about making the tea as well?

Majid: That that @

Laura: So @

Majid: Oh yeah well=

Laura: =And jokes directed at.. about...it's my job to make the tea.. as well.. so @

Majid: Yeah I think I think.. The culture needs to change (HH) I think in terms of=

Pauline: =Hmm

Gabby: You're all nodding

(FG8)

M2: I think women can be very much seen as secretaries in the.. organisation.. some of my [*administrators*] who are.. guys who are also PAs.. some of the managers won't ask them to do some of the diary management.. they're like.. "well I can't ask him to do that.. he's a man"... (1) even though that's his job.. and they're willing to do it

The gendered devaluation of admin work results in gender-differential treatment of employees doing the same job, but not the same tasks (cf. 9.3 for discussion). The more subservient, housekeeping-like tasks are, reportedly, considered demeaning exclusively for men, constructed as "too good" for devalued university admin (house)work.

9.2. Men and men's work in HEA

This section explores participants' patterned accounts constructing men as being, feeling, being considered or made to feel "too good" to do devalued women's work, and simultaneously as more suitable for management, leadership and technical/specialised work.

9.2.1. Men are "too good" to work in university admin

Some data excerpts where men are constructed as either seeing themselves or being considered by recruiters as "too good" to work in university admin were already discussed in 9.1. Several female participants account for the underrepresentation of men in university admin in terms of them 'aiming higher', i.e. straight to university management roles (e.g. M1, M5, L1, FG5, cf. 9.2.2), 'going for bigger and better jobs' (M13), and/or being encouraged to do so due to gendered expectations:

Gabby: Can you think of any.. reasons why so few men instead are doing these jobs

M1: Because they would think it's beneath them.. prob-- <@possibly!@>.. men are encouraged to be more competitive.. and... to.. strive to do the best they can.. and championed more.. so they would... naturally... probably look higher on the.. hierarchical scale of jobs and.. and aim higher

M6: I don't think that's one of those.. kind of.. careers that people would.. like.. <@ "I really wanna work in university administration" @> I think most people do just fall into it? so.. men maybe have a stronger vision of where they want to go and more women kind of like.. "well I'll go into this and.. temp here for a while or do this for a little while and see what happens"

M6 reframes falling into HEA (cf. 6.2) as a gendered tendency. Men are said to have 'a stronger vision' (M6) and pursue a career in 'their kind of fields', whereas women end up in G2/G3 roles although 'some of them even have law degrees' (M8). As M1, along with several other female participants, argues, men (are encouraged to) aim higher also because of their own or others' perception that devalued, feminised admin roles – constructed as easy, mundane, unimportant, passive, subordinate and deferential – are beneath them:

I have no idea why women do it but it is very much a women's job... (2) and I think that men would feel like they would be degrading themselves if they did it (M12)

There's definitely a perception.. or at least I've encountered that.. women are better at the clerical stuff? .. the routine stuff or.. -- and I don't agree with this but.. the boring stuff? they're certainly considered more reliable [...] a woman's much more likely to get it done.. and not get bored with it.. there seems to be more sensitivity around.. "oh the poor man he's bored"... like it's a bit demeaning for him to have to.. fetch the coffee.. or whatever.. which irates me when I come across it? ... I've certainly met quite a few men.. who feel like it's beneath them to do certain tasks.. whereas actually no you're getting paid to do the job and you signed a contract so you.. you can get on with it thank you very much.. just because I'm a woman and an administrator it doesn't mean.. I'm gonna clear up your coffee (L6)

Male FG participants talk about what their female colleagues define as the 'social issue' (Yokow, FG5) or 'stigma' (M2, L4) for men doing devalued women's work in similar, but hedged, terms:

Gabby: What could be.. some reasons behind this gender distribution
Jack: I think it's gender stereotypes and things [...] because of the perception of what job you should be getting you feel that because of you're male you shouldn't be going into administration.. you should be going into something more.. assertive I suppose (FG1)

Majid: It is also the.. @ I don't know.. it's the attitude.. that men have erm.. about certain roles.. for they may think "oh.. secretary the way it's phrased.. oh it doesn't fit me!" With me I don't really care if my.. signature says [*job title*] or.. -- I'm sure other guys would be a bit bothered.. "well I don't know about that well I don't wanna be known as... a [*job title*]"... I think it is the title as well... customer service again that sounds very... kind of.. feminine.. erm.. student welfare I mean it's just the way it's titled I think..

Laura: But I don't know what else you would call that [person..]
Majid: [yeah I know] I know
Martina: @
Majid: But it's just [...] when they see it I don't know how much they'd be like "oh let me go for it" (FG8)

The 'social issue' for men doing university admin work is made sense of by these male participants as linked to external pressures and gendered expectations. These are said to influence *other* men ('other guys'; 'you'), who do not apply for these roles for fear of 'being known' as a man doing women's work, or as L5 puts it, of their 'friends taking the mick'. In both excerpts above, the 'social issue' male administrators face is externalised. It is also talked about as a result of doing "feminine-sounding" as well as customer-service, support, non-assertive (i.e. subservient) work. This 'social issue' thus reportedly stems from the feminisation of this work as much as its devaluation.

Language plays a key role in this interplay. Participants recurrently discuss pretty much any G4/G5 generalist administrator job title/role (in italics in the extracts below) as potentially putting men off these jobs:

- Yokow: From *administrators* men.. they'll find a way.. to actually move in to something else and not... moving to.. an *executive assistant* role [...*because*] it's just seen as a woman's job it's always..
- Bev: That support type of role.. and I think as well the difference.. the other roles are seen more as support although they support as well but... I think *supporting students* is different is seen more as an.. acceptable sort of male thing than *supporting the academics*..
- Yokow: And I am sure that is why the word *administrator* came into the job role [...] just to make it... more appealing for men otherwise if you called it.. I don't know... *student support* you're not going to find any men working there..
- Bev: It's a real cover word for.. @
- Yokow: I'm certain.. a hundred percent.. they wouldn't do it [...] that's just the way it has been.. a woman.. is the *secretary* and she's there to help and they've changed that name for *administrator* just to make it more appealing to.. men
- Bev: And *executive assistant* even.. will attract many.. men.. [cos it hasn't got the name]
- Yokow: [cos it's got executive in there..]
- Stacey: It's a manipulation of=
- Yokow: =of words.. yeah.. even *officer*
- Bev: Or *PA* even.. is still quite female.. while *executive assistant*.. or.. *executive officer* [is far less gender-biased I think.. yeah]
- Yokow: [or *officer* as well.. there's another thing] *officer executive officer* oh yeah they'll go for that but they won't..
- Gabby: So does this mean that you think the title does the trick and they behave maybe differ[ently when they're in the job or=]
- Yokow: [Of course of course!]
- Bev: =Yeah I think so.. yeah absolutely.. coz that will attract a slightly different group of people.. and then... that. means. that that's seen differently.. generally so it makes it more equal [...]
- Yokow: They can say I'm an.. *officer* not an *assistant* "oh so you... you're just a *secretary*".. so they don't have that.. social issue of.. being perceived.. -- and.. it's not the money... it's just that certain people are... embarrassed to say that they're actually *assistants*

(FG5)

Mel: Men might think that they do other type of work and so therefore wouldn't.. apply.. -- guys that wouldn't apply to do my job and if they saw the word *administrator* they wouldn't.. apply to do that type of job?

(FG9)

Interestingly, what FG5 participants describe as a 'cover word' aimed at making support roles sound 'more appealing for men', i.e. the word *administrator*, is precisely what Mel says puts her male friends off applying for a job like her own. Regardless of what these roles are called, men's alleged embarrassment to say that they are PAs, EAs, secretaries, receptionists, assistants or administrators derives from these job titles evoking devalued, easy, mundane, subordinate and deferential *women's* work. Participants' reported embarrassment to talk about being university administrators in social situations (cf. 6.3) is thus reframed later on in the FGs as a gendered issue. As a material consequence of the *gendered* devaluation of university admin, it is said to affect mainly (or exclusively) male administrators.

As deferential, subordinate women's work, university admin (especially the allegedly more "female" roles) is constructed as threatening (other) men's sense of heteronormative masculinity:

I never really feel that... (2) or perhaps I do.. slightly feel that I'm doing.. a slightly.. almost.. feminine type of role perhaps.. but I.. never really feel I've got a problem with that really [... but] I think perhaps.. men.. if they've got like.. a sense of.. machismo perhaps or a sense of their own sort of... (2) yeah like.. their own masculinity.. perhaps... they might not like.. the idea of... people thinking that they're doing.. a sort of more feminine role [...] It's funny actually because at CSU there's actually quite a lot of male receptionists aren't there.. and... (1) it.. almost doesn't seem right sometimes.. it's weird isn't it.. I mean I'm all -- I have absolutely no objections to it whatsoever... but perhaps.. on television when you do see a male receptionist you.. see stereotypes you know.. and.. he might be portrayed as gay even you know.. so for anyone with a macho you know sort of masculine.. instinct they'd be.. horrified by that probably wouldn't they.. and.. shirk at the idea of being a receptionist (L3)

I think men don't tend to like what they view as routine.. non-creative tasks.. often.. all of these aren't considered.. masculine.. roles [...] most of the men that I know.. are not interested in staying.. at a junior level.. they want to go up and I think a lot of that is also social pressure.. what it is to be a man to be the breadwinner [...] and they don't wanna be subservient they want.. to be.. <@in charge@>.. and.. sometimes they don't even want to be in charge it's just that that's what their parents drilled into them.. if they're gonna be a proper.. little... <@version of their father@> (L6)

L3 distances himself from those men whose sense of 'machismo' may be threatened by doing such 'feminine type of roles'. This sense of 'machismo', or heteronormative masculinity, is linked to men's "traditional" role as breadwinners within the heteronormative family, and to our societal and 'cultural overvaluation of men' and men's work and 'devaluation of women' and women's work (Williams, 1993b: 7).

Being “too good” for university admin, men are also unlikely to be willing to risk having their masculinity (and heterosexuality) threatened to enter lower-paid, devalued university admin work (a recurrent point made by literature on men doing women’s work, cf. Chapter 3).

As noted in 9.1.2, the variability in participants’ accounts (constructing men as both “not good enough” and “too good” for university admin) works ideologically to discursively account for both the horizontal *and* the vertical gender imbalance. To account for their underrepresentation in admin roles, men are constructed as “not good enough”, and therefore not “let in”; to account for the overrepresentation on higher grades, men are constructed as “too good” and therefore pushed upwards (also cf. 9.2.2). Either way, they end up being discursively “pushed out” of these jobs, so this variability eventually achieves similar ideological effects.

On the other hand, these competing constructions sometimes create an ideological dilemma which participants solve by reasserting the gendered devaluation of university admin. In the FG9 extract below, men’s not ‘being good enough’ at recruitment stage is reframed as the result of their feeling ‘above’, i.e. ‘too good’ for admin work:

- Vanessa: They wrote poorly.. they didn't put any effort into the [applica]tion
Aba: [cos I think]...
Vanessa: cos of the way they look at it 'it's admin oh'..
Aba: [a:h why care! do it!]
Vanessa: [you know.. "what if] I show that I can just do this"... "I've got competencies in microsoft office packages then that's fine"... what d'you need -- you don't need that much you know.. "oh I don't need to really make a glorifying personal statement to get my foot in the door" and that's the way they looked at it
(FG9)

- L1: "I'm just really bad at admin".. I know a lot of male friends who'd say that.. and then.. they are actually good at admin but.. it's just like not... cool to say that you're good at admin you just sound a bit uptight.. and boring... [...] if you think of the.. mathematics and engineering school.. that's completely male-dominated.. [...] and that's because again.. society tells you that engineers are better than administrators

Male candidates are said not to ‘put enough effort’ in their applications because they consider admin work as beneath their abilities. It is not ‘cool’ to be good at admin, as L1 puts it, precisely because it is devalued, gendered work. ‘Society tells you’ that it is much ‘cooler’ to be good at engineering and maths, which are, not coincidentally, male-dominated disciplines. L1’s male friends stating that they are ‘really bad at admin’ thus becomes a way to express men’s socially-constructed superiority to devalued women’s work.

Similarly, FG5 participants talk about their male colleagues as not doing their job properly because they consider some of the most menial tasks involved (e.g. fixing the photocopier) as 'demeaning':

- Yokow: We had actually two guys working in this team [...] it was not the job for them [...] because.. they feel offended when someone comes in and asks them.. "ah can you.. come and look at the.." again photocopier.. <@that's my best example@>.. it's not because the person is.. insulting you.. and thinking that's all you can do.. it's generally.. they need help [... *One of them*] actually... at the end of his signature.. at work.. he had.. a link to his CV just to prove to people that he was studying for a degree..
- Francesca: He's very insecure.. I've known him for a long time he's a very insecure person..
- Yokow: No but then again like.. most... after a while I'm sure [*the other*] would become like that as well it's.. to not insult my intelligence.. because now you're asking me to.. put the paper in photocopier whereas I know who I am... women... we.. you know=
- Stacey: =We [just do it.. we just do it..]
- Bev: [We're just more confident!] we're just more confident.. [...] I don't go back to my desk and feel demeaned you know @ about the experience!
- Yokow: Yeah.. and I get emails from where Francesca sits from male.. male administrators.. asking me to do things they can do and I.. say no.. that's your role.. and [...] you agreed to do that!
- Bev: Your papers are going from this building to this building you can -- rather than me come and collect it you want them over here.. bring them over here @

(FG5)

Again, female administrators discursively construct themselves as the ideal university admin worker because they are 'confident' enough not to feel demeaned by doing devalued work (cf. Chapter 8). Similarly to Henson & Rogers' (2001) male temp clerical workers, FG5 participants' male colleagues reportedly deploy some coping strategies to counteract the 'social issue' of doing "women's work". For example, one of them added a link to his CV to his electronic signature, supposedly to show he was studying for a degree, and that this job was just a stopgap; others allegedly refuse to do what they consider the most menial and demeaning tasks. Being "not good enough" reportedly becomes, as with housework, a strategy for men to avoid demeaning work, work they are (socially constructed as) "too good" for.

That participants' co-construction of men as "not good enough" and/or "too good" for university admin can also work to *individual* men's disadvantage is not under debate here. As Efi puts it in FG7, 'maybe there are some men out there who enjoy' this type of work but are pushed out of it. Nevertheless, defining this as "male disadvantage" or "discrimination against men" in turn shifts the attention away from who, *generally speaking*, eventually benefits from these co-constructed accounts. As

“too good” for devalued university admin, men are simultaneously constructed as better suited to management, leadership and technical/specialised roles, i.e. more highly valued, better paid, ‘bigger and better jobs’ (M13).

9.2.2. Think manager, think male

The (stereo)typical association of management/leadership with men is often deployed to talk about perceptions of gendered work in HEA and to account for the gender imbalance (as previously noted in 8.2). In the extract below, M7 argues that the perception of men as better leaders and managers influences who gets to be *seen* as a leader, and therefore who applies and is recruited into these roles:

You don't need any rocket science to just.. visually.. look at what's at the top [...] this sort of like... merry-go-round of.. men.. white men.. men of a certain age.. being perceived as the leaders of the university in different areas and again it gives across some pretty strong messages... I'd say gender-wise age-wise and ethnicity-wise [...] of course it sometimes feels there is a natural bias to appointing men at a senior level (M7)

While M7 talks of ‘a natural bias to appointing men’ in senior roles, M9 appears to account for the vertical gender imbalance as merit-based, i.e. as a consequence of men *being* better managers and leaders:

I think women... are good administrators.. I'm not so sure they're always the best.. managers [...] so I think... -- and a lot of women would.. kill me for this but... women are very emotional as we both know and.. I think for some.. very senior managerial roles I do think sometimes men.. can cope with the stresses and the strains better than women would (M9)

This quote from M9 is one of the very few examples of participants explicitly stating that men *are* better managers leaders. Interestingly, there are also no instances in the data sets of participants using the word discrimination to talk about the over-representation of men in university management (although M7’s quote above gets quite close to it, and, for example, M2 and L6 speak of being a man as being (perceived as) ‘an advantage’).

The association of men with management (and viceversa) is so strong that, although some state that the imbalance does not reflect their experience (cf. Chapter 10), the vast majority of participants who agreed to complete the last task (cf. Table 2, p. 75; Table 3, p.81) got the trajectory of the vertical gender imbalance exactly right. Those who did not located the bigger gap between female and male representation at CSU on senior management grades, rather than on G2/G3.

Not only management, but also technical, specialised work is recurrently constructed as men's work in the data sets. Interestingly, this is discursively achieved by reframing men's lack of those very skills that make women ideal university administrators as an asset when it comes to specialisation. For example, men's (alleged) lack of multi-tasking skills means that they can only do 'one thing at a time' (Majid, FG8) and therefore specialise in it. As specialisation is required in professional, technical roles (e.g. IT, Finance), this is used to account for the horizontal gender imbalance: 'anything technical.. is thought of as being male' (M1).

As noted in Chapter 7, progression in HEA is also made sense of as specialisation, or going from 'admin' to 'experts':

- Amala: As you increase the grade, you're... implying specialisation.. or specialist sort of... competencies, whereas admin is do everything.. and be able to do everything and that's what women do.. like.. naturally and then the men.. they tend to be able to focus on something
[... *several turns later*]
- Anna: The men take over from grade 6... so from the process experts.. apparently! @
[...]
- Samya: I think just that... "process" seems more sort of masculine doesn't it
Anna: It does doesn't it.. "process experts"
Kat: Yeah.. compared to admin
Amala: Yeah it goes from admin to "experts"
Anna: It sounds more technical doesn't it?

(FG2)

- M9: Admin.. most definitely women are better at that.. <@in my opinion@>... that's why we have higher people at [G2/G3]... "process experts"... yeah... I guess if you've got a.. bloke in there who's really good in... IT [...] or a specific... -- I do think men are a little bit.. better when they need to.. focus on a particular area (M9)

Women are constructed as the ideal university admin worker due to their "natural" ability to multi-task and 'do everything', i.e. be a "jack of all trades" (cf. 8.2.2). As the saying goes though, "the jack of all trades is the master of none". When accounting for the vertical gender imbalance, men's alleged lack of multi-tasking skills is positively reframed as a skill in itself: the ability to focus on one thing or area, become "experts" in it, and therefore progress. Unable to multi-task, but able to specialise, men are again pushed out of lower-level admin work and simultaneously pushed upwards. The variability in participants' accounts thus allows them to account for (and legitimise) both the horizontal and vertical gender imbalance.

Women are not constructed, as men are in the case of admin, as "too good" for management and specialised/technical work. This is because management is more highly valued (and better paid) than admin. Even those participants who do not

shy away from accounting for the imbalance as the result of gender-biased practices or gendered assumptions frequently draw on a “fix the women” discourse to account for women’s under-representation in senior management roles. For example, women’s stagnation in lower-level, devalued admin work is consistently attributed to their lack of confidence (at times also ambition), as well as to their search for security and stability, as opposed to men’s competitive, risk-taking, career-driven instinct:

You have this perception that men.. perhaps are a little bit more ambitious.. or maybe they think about that.. more clearly from the outset... and women think [...] maybe a bit more about security... but that is <@gross stereotyping@> (M4)

Going back to.. sort of my experience of.. when I was at university and who the administrators would be.. it would be.. women in their sort of late-sort of thirties to forties who.. [...] didn't have such great career aspirations.. and were happy to sort of stay in that position (James, FG1)

HEA’s construction as a stable, secure work environment is here reframed from being a gender-neutral perk of working in HEA (cf. 6.2) to being something only women (especially of a “certain age”, M4) look for in a job. Likewise, lack of ambition and career drive, initially mentioned as an assumption “people/managers” have of *all* university administrators, is, when accounting for the vertical gender imbalance, reframed as characterising exclusively female administrators:

Samya: Guys are more likely to... keep... putting themselves forward for a promotion... whereas a woman is always like “no I'm not quite ready.. I'll give it another year”..

Kat: Yeah it's this confidence thing isn't it

(FG2)

L1: I've seen research about that people.. when they ask.. men and women to look at the same job offer.. and the experiences and skills are pretty similar.. the women say.. “oh actually I only cover.. 70% of the person specification”.. and men will say “oh I cover a 110% of the person specification!” even if they've got.. pretty much the same CV.. so it might be that they just.. again.. stereotypes and there are lots of unconfident men.. but it might be that the average.. man.. feels more confident so they apply for a higher grade? so they're quicker.. on progressing because they start higher up

Women are also said to lack the confidence to make their voice heard, ‘blow their own trumpet’ (M1; also cf. Scharff, 2015), claim credit for their own achievements (M1; FG4), network across and outside their institution and negotiate a payrise (which are, not coincidentally, also cited as the requirements to be the ideal neoliberal HEA worker and progress, cf. 7.2.2):

My male colleagues... (2) have more network.. across the university they know more people.. more people know who they are [...] maybe there is.. something

unconscious in me as a woman who knows that I'm not.. I'm not.. I'm not that good at selling myself (M4)

I think also it comes down to the confidence thing so a lot of women.. perhaps won't ask won't push for a promotion.. or payrise or.. whereas the males.. may do.. that's probably why they're all at the top @ (M6)

Ultimately, drawing on a “fix the women” discourse results in women being held responsible for the vertical gender imbalance, and conversely, in constructing the vertical imbalance as something women only have themselves to blame for:

I'm not bothered.. and <@I know it's awful@>.. and many women around me would hate me for saying it.. but I'm not bothered because there are always.. gonna be men that are higher up the food chain.. in their grey suits.. sitting there telling us all what to do.. and I think that.. if more women stopped moaning about it and started acting on it you know you'd get further.. don't moan and say “oh it's all men”... just.. push yourself forward and go for it (M12)

Women's alleged failure to embody the ideal neoliberal HEA worker and progress is allegedly what accounts for the vertical gender imbalance. In HE(A) as a neoliberal workplace, the responsibility for change in the gender imbalance is therefore on women: women should work on themselves, rather than ‘moaning’ about structural inequalities (cf. Gill & Orgad, 2015; Gill et al, 2017). The next chapter explores participants' tendency to draw on elements of what Gill and colleagues (2017) define as a ‘postfeminist sensibility’ to account for the gender imbalance while simultaneously denying the existence of structural gender inequality.

So far, this chapter has argued that participants tend to discursively push men “upwards” when asked to account for the vertical gender imbalance. It would thus seem that participants construct the vertical gender imbalance as the result of a ‘glass escalator’ effect (Williams, 1992, cf. 3.2). The next sub-section discusses competing accounts co-produced by participants.

9.2.3. Gendered (lack of) progression: the “glass escalator” and the “external competition” accounts

When accounting for the vertical gender imbalance, participants often reframe getting stuck on G3 (cf. 7.1) as a “gender issue”, affecting female administrators in particular:

Vanessa: Around grade 4 and 5... (1) I think women can... not easily but.. you sort of get to here... and then you sort of=
Mel: =then you're kind of stuck!
Pam: Well I got stuck here! [*i.e. at G3*] @
All: @
Pam: I think it's quite difficult to get from here to here.. from 3 to 4

Mel: Yeah I agree with you (FG9)

M4: So the curious thing is then.. if you have more women coming in.. at grade 2 and 3... and then all these men that take over up in the grades.. are they those few men who start down here or are they coming from elsewhere?.. because.. if you have natural progression within an organisation.. if you have a majority of women coming in at the lower grades... you would think that they would trickle upwards... they're working their way up and the trend should continue.. otherwise it's just that those few men are the ones who manage to climb up there... or they'd rather take a man from outside than promote.. people internally... (5) no it doesn't create a good work environment

M1: I would probably imagine most women have come in at a lower grade and worked their way up.. if they're at a higher grade.. whereas men might.. not have had to do that.. so I would like to see.. women [...] give that ceiling credit

Women's tendency to "get stuck" on G3 is defined as 'surprising' (M6) and 'curious' (M4, above): as M4 puts it, women should 'trickle upwards' if there is 'natural progression' within an organisation. Three recurrent accounts are offered for women's lack of progression from G5, exemplified by the extracts above: a) men benefit from the glass escalator; b) men's entry point in HEA is higher than women's (i.e. straight on G4+ rather than G2/G3; cf. M1; also Strachan et al, 2013), so women have to deal with an additional 'ceiling' or 'leap'; c) (male) managers are externally recruited, hindering (female) administrators' internal progression (cf. 7.1.3). Accounts a) and c) are competing: in particular, the "external competition" account – account c) – problematises the "glass escalator" – account a) – which assumes linear internal progression (for men at least).

In turn, that external male candidates might be selected over female administrators to cover higher-grade positions is accounted for in two main ways:

Bev: They're coming from exter – probably externally appointed and moving.. [moving institutions..]

Yokow: [and a lot of.. the people] coming in there.. have worked.. in different sectors definitely.. and I think the problem between grade 3 and 4 is as well that.. there's no -- there's less opportunity.. there's nowhere to go so.. if on top of it you need to go away and have a baby... it's even worse

Stacey: I don't think there should necessarily be any stigma attached to the fact that you're female and you.. never progressed past grade 3.. but I would.. I hope that there were opportunities to progress... for those that did want to do it... and I'm not sure from what you all have been saying.. that there is [...] (HHH) it's not an easy transition (HHHx) (FG5)

Samya: I think it's... development once they're actually doing the role... [...] it's because.. a woman's happy to just do admin.. doesn't mean she's not happy to get some more... process experience

(FG2)

External recruitment is, in the FG5 extract, described as exacerbating an already not 'easy transition'. The G3-G4 transition is allegedly made even more difficult for women not just because they are the vast majority of G3 employees, but also because 'on top of it' 'women have babies' (cf. 10.2 for a critique). In FG2, Samya reframes the lack of development opportunities (initially mentioned in relation to *all* G3 administrators) as hindering only women's career progression. This she links to the *gendered* devaluation (rather than just the devaluation) of university admin work, i.e. to the gendered assumption that only women are 'happy to just do admin' and able/willing to just 'get on with it' (cf. 9.1.2).

A meaningful difference between FG participants' and managers' talk about getting stuck on their respective grades is, as noted in 7.2, that only the former appear to make sense of it as the material consequence of the devaluation of their work. This is because management, constructed as men's work, is discursively gendered but, as it is gendered "male", it is not devalued. When accounting for the vertical gender imbalance on senior management grades (CSU G6/G7), gendered devaluation is therefore not mentioned. However, the other co-constructed accounts are roughly similar to those produced when accounting for the drop in the percentage of women from G3 to G4: a) the glass escalator; b) external competition (from the male-dominated corporate world); c) motherhood and childcare (cf. 10.2.2).

The "external/corporate competition" account has arguably been made available in HE(A) as a result of the increasing corporatisation and marketisation of the "entrepreneurial university" (cf. 2.1; Mautner, 2005). The requirements to run the neoliberal university (business-management, development and entrepreneurial skills and experience; cf. 7.2.2 and the corpus-based study, Appendix C) are understood by participants as placing external candidates from the male-dominated corporate world in an advantageous position over G5 *generalist* managers. In a way then, the "external/corporate competition" account could be one of the 'new concepts' which Williams argued are needed to 'understand workplace gender inequality [...] in our neoliberal era' (2013: 609). Due to the discursive nature of this study, rather than a "concept" or explanation, external/corporate competition is analysed here as an account, i.e. in terms of its effects.

When it comes to accounting for the vertical gender imbalance on senior management grades, the "external competition" account gains further implications. At CSU, G5 is almost gender-balanced, but men are over-represented on G6/G7. As it

implies linear progression, the “glass escalator” account constructs the gender imbalance (and potential gender inequality) as endemic to HEA, and, therefore, as HEA’s responsibility (to change). According to the “external competition” account instead, the vertical imbalance in HEA is caused by the recruitment of external candidates from the male-dominated corporate world:

I do think you tend to get.. people from.. private.. corporate background often.. from sort of.. perhaps more competitive industries [...] more sort of... profit-driven environments or something.. and they've kind of proven to.. increase efficiency or.. some crap like that... if they're coming from that kind of background that's.. also gonna be.. more male-dominated.. in the highest of echelons (L3)

What tends to happen is.. you might get more women who progress from grade 3 to grade 4... within sector? but then.. from then grade 4 5 6 and 7 I think you probably get a lot of people who enter the sector then? or who move from a university into another university.. and I think that [*i.e. the vertical imbalance*] is why [...] you get a few people who do... manage to actually work their way up the sector.. you get people who come from other sectors.. straight into grade 6s and 7s (L7)

When participants co-produce the “external competition” account, they also construct the vertical gender imbalance (and potential gender inequality/discrimination) as being *brought into* CSU/HEA from the male-dominated corporate world. As not “HEA’s fault”, the vertical imbalance is thus also not HEA’s responsibility to act upon and change.

Participants’ patterned accounts which work to deny the existence of gender inequality in gender-imbalanced HEA are critiqued in Chapter 10. The next section instead revisits the oft-mentioned “old-school HE culture”, i.e. the “them and us” divide, by discussing some episodes of gender-differential treatment told by participants.

9.3. Gendering the “them and us” divide in HEA

Scholars have critiqued the pervasive ‘them and us’ culture between academic and “non-academic” staff (e.g. Conway and Dobson, 2003). Traces of such divisive culture were identified in this study’s data sets, not only between administrators and academics (cf. 6.4). The several ‘them and us’ oppositions participants co-construct are all reframed as gendered in the second half of the research encounters:

- public sector vs. private sector: this opposition is used to discursively construct HEA as a “female-friendly” sector (cf. Chapter 10 for further discussion);
- female administrators vs. male administrators: traces of this binary were explored in relation to the feminisation of the ideal university admin worker (cf. 8.2-8.3) and the gendered devaluation of university admin (cf. 9.1-9.2);

- female administrators/managers vs. male senior academics
- female administrators/managers vs. male senior managers

The last two oppositions are the focus of the rest of this section. They are co-constructed mainly when participants account for the vertical gender imbalance (as they all imply a gender/gendered work hierarchy, e.g. women vs. men; “women’s work” vs. “men’s work”). These oppositions also feature in episodes of gender-differential treatment told by female participants which are, however, rarely explicitly made sense of as the manifestation of gender inequality.

The administrators vs. senior academics opposition has an implicit as well as explicit gender dimension (as e.g. Eveline, 2004 and McLean, 1996 also note). The first comes from statistical data partly discussed in 1.1: in UK Universities, about 77% of professors are male, whereas 81.4% of secretarial and administrative staff are women (ECU, 2016: 210; 212). That this constructs a gendered “them and us” divide transpires from some data excerpts where academics, especially professors, are assumed to be male and the administrators supporting and assisting them are assumed to be female:

I thought it'd be very.. formal.. [...] and you would have to address the academics as professor or sir <@or something like that@> (Laura, FG8)

I think.. to do with the changing of the names [*from secretary to administrator*] is a slight change of the role because the secretary.. your job was to type.. and of course now.. men have computers so they'll type themselves (Stacey, FG5)

At times, the potential gendered overtones of such power hierarchy are explicitly spelled out:

There is an issue.. because obviously all of the.. senior.. academics are male.. predominantly the administrators are.. female.. and.. it can be a bit tricky.. because.. actually where I work it's actually incredibly hierarchical? having all of these males at the top.. and the females kind of beneath them especially as there is such a huge pay gap.. between us as well?... it has caused.. major issues... with regards to respect for.. people.. and.. I would honestly believe that actually if.. there were more men? in these roles?.. the struggle wouldn't be the same (L4)⁴⁷

The hierarchy between male (senior) academics and female administrators is made sense of not only as being based on individuals’ sex, but also on the hierarchical

⁴⁷ Another interesting quote was by Sara, who took part in pilot FG1: ‘Academics also sometimes treat you a little bit like.. you’re lower down cos.. you’re only.. an admin person... (1) and I’m not sure.. cos we’re talking about gender.. if it’s also because I’m a woman? I do get a sense that.. male academics are sometimes... quite patronising and obviously I don’t know if it’s.. just because I’m an administrator or also because I’m a woman’.

positioning of gendered work, and in particular on the (gendered) devaluation of university admin work.

The following episode, told by a male and a female FG participant, provides another example of how the administrators vs. (senior) academics opposition is constructed along gender lines:

Rob: In my last role [...] one of the.. academics who's an older chap.. -- he wasn't very good on computers and he brought me a letter that needed typing up.. and he said "oh I feel bad giving to you.. I should give it to one of the girls"... cos I worked with three girls.. you know.. that's obviously a generational thing as well but.. [...] there's still an element of that

(FG1)

Laura: We did also have an academic who.. joked about how... he should give his copy-typing to the women because they.. all knew shorthand and that was.. who did the typing... (1) I <@didn't find that very funny!@>.. but erm... I hadn't been there long and I was.. informed that he was making a joke but... erm.. <@I still don't think it's [*inaudible*] a joke to be made really@>

(FG8)

Gender is not simply juxtaposed to individuals' sex, but also works as a structural principle (cf. 4.1.3), around which the allocation and social value of work is organised. Easy, mundane, routine admin work is demeaning for men only – male administrators and (male) academics⁴⁸ – because it is constructed as devalued women's work. Although it is framed as part of an 'old-school culture' or 'a generational thing' (cf. 10.1 for further discussion) this episode exemplifies how such gendered "them and us" divide, based on the "typing pool stereotype" (cf. 9.1.1) still operates in HE today.

Another hierarchical, gendered binary opposition is established in the data sets between (female) administrators/managers and male senior managers. What is meant by senior management is not always clear-cut: this can include senior academic staff in senior management roles or can be used to refer to PS G6/G7. Either way, senior management is male-dominated, and the opposition with

⁴⁸ As demeaning, devalued work, admin and pastoral work are not coincidentally carried out by female, especially junior, academics. Critiques of this (e.g. Cotterill and Waterhouse, 2004; Guarino & Borden, 2017) point out how such devalued, unrewarded work "distracts" female academics from the "core" business of HE, i.e. research, thus limiting their career progression. Rather than challenging the gendered devaluation of this work, however, proposed solutions include encouraging female academics to decline such work and/or the university to ensure it is more evenly distributed amongst academics. Encouragingly, ECU's Athena SWAN (ECU, 2017) now explicitly requests information on workload allocation by gender, including how these "citizenship" activities are weighted in academic promotion decisions, in order to revalue and reward such work.

administrators is articulated along gender lines by drawing on an overarching gender differences discourse:

- Mel: I think that's why sometimes we feel like senior management don't care or feel like they can't empathise with us mostly because they're all men
- All: Hm mm yeah
- Mel: And we're mostly women and I think men are very like -- this is really like.. stereotype but like quite like hard.. to the point.. don't care
- Aba: Yeah
- Mel: Whereas.. we are in a position which is a customer-focused.. and we wanna try help and care about people [...] and I think.. that people would view.. men and women like that.. and I think that's why it is how.. we feel about management

(FG9)

A gendered “them and us” opposition with senior management is also established by most of the female (including senior) managers interviewed. They report being treated differently from their male counterparts (e.g. being judged as bossy or being ignored) and having to work harder to be taken seriously, even in allegedly “female-friendly” HEA. To avoid identifying individuals, and because this thesis focuses on lower-level university administration rather than management, only a couple of de-identified examples are reported here:

I went into a... university-wide meeting and I was representing the [*Academic Head of School...*] and one of the senior managers.. handed me a packet of biscuits?.. with a pink wrapper and went “here.. you should have these they're girly biscuits”... @ and I was like.. what?... it was a bit like.. “there dear.. off you go.. well done for being at a meeting” [...] so after that I'm just sat there going like... “oh what am I doing here”... you know.. “I'm not being taken seriously” [...] so in that respect then yes.. being a male is an advantage in being a senior manager.. because people will listen to you (M2)

In a pretty male-dominated environment.. how challenging it is to be seen as a credible... leader.. for what you do.. and that.. has been really really hard [...] because even though... (1) you're there as an equal.. it doesn't feel like that... [...] and that goes for quite a lot of colleagues.. particularly when they go into Schools? [...] they'd be seen then as the lady that's come in.. who's going to do the bureaucracy bit and they're like “don't worry about it dear I'm sure it will all go away and I'm sure you're not right cos.. you're not an academic either” (M7)

I know from my personal experience.. that as a woman... and as a line-manager I'm expected to be a lot more sympathetic and gentle and soft-toned? [...] I started this whole thing thinking.. “oh well.. you know.. gender's never got in my way” but when I think about it actually.. (HHH) yeah.. it does play a role... just maybe not.. in the same obvious way.. not in an actively discriminatory way (L6)

These episodes are many and as such part and parcel of day-to-day work in HE(A). It is argued here that they are expressions of a *gendered* “them and us” divide in HE, often sustained by the gendered devaluation of university admin work and by the

vertically-imbalanced gender distribution of staff. Participants, however, rarely if ever tend to make sense of, openly recognise, name or challenge these episodes as the manifestation of systemic gender inequality (apart from M7, cf. Chapter 11 and 12.2.1 for further discussion). If gender is said to matter, this is not in an 'obvious', 'actively discriminatory way' (L6). Section 10.4 critiques participants' tendency to deny that gender matters in gender-imbalanced HEA, for example by turning these episodes into isolated, one-off experiences in otherwise "female-friendly" HEA.

9.4. Conclusion

This chapter explored how the discursive devaluation of university admin as easy, mundane, boring, passive, invisible, subservient, deferential work is gendered when participants account for the vertical gender imbalance (cf. 9.1). Women are said to be overrepresented in university admin *because* these roles are devalued. As theoretical and empirical work reviewed in Chapter 3 showed (e.g. Reskin, 1988; Williams, 1993b), devalued work is often feminised and conversely, women's work is often devalued. Men are, conversely, constructed as (being considered) "too good" to be doing devalued women's work. This, along with the simultaneous construction of men as "not good enough" (cf. 8.3), works ideologically to push men out of university admin jobs and into more prestigious, better-paid work (e.g. university technical/specialised and management work, cf. 9.2).

When accounting for the vertical gender imbalance, participants tend to reframe several of the points they had previously talked about. For example, women's (alleged) patience, ability to cope with boring work and willingness to be demeaned are re-constructed from what makes them the ideal university admin worker to what hinders their progression and keeps them in these allegedly dull, subservient jobs. Men's lack of multi-tasking skills is positively reframed as the ability to focus on one area, specialise and therefore progress. The lack of development and progression opportunities for G3/G3 administrators is reframed as a "gender issue": only women are considered "happy to just do admin" (Samya, FG2) and therefore it is only women's development which is not invested in.

When participants account for the vertical gender imbalance, (lack of) progression at both CSU key career transition points (G3-G4 and G5-G6) is discursively gendered in ideologically interplaying ways. Only "getting stuck on G3" is accounted for as the material consequence of gendered devaluation, because it is admin, not management, that is discursively devalued. The other patterned accounts of women's lack of progression are fairly consistent: a) motherhood and childcare (cf.

10.2.2); b) the glass escalator; c) external competition, with men entering HEA straight on (senior) management grades (cf. 9.2.3).

The “external competition” account was interpreted as competing with the “glass escalator” account. The former was discussed as an account made available in the neoliberal, corporatised, entrepreneurial university; the latter, instead, as an account typically produced in the context of “traditional” – rather than neoliberal – workplaces, where employees (especially men) can experience linear career progression (Williams, 1992; 2013). It was argued that these two patterned accounts also have competing effects. The “glass escalator” account constructs the vertical gender imbalance as endemic to HEA and therefore as HEA’s responsibility. The “external competition” account instead constructs it as being brought into HEA from the male-dominated corporate sector. This in turn thus works to relieve HEA of its responsibility for the gender imbalance, and also of the onus for action and change (also cf. 10.1).

What is endemic to HE(A) is the gendered “them and us” culture which can be traced in episodes of gender-differential treatment told by participants. This was discussed as based on a gendered hierarchy of individuals and work (i.e. on gender as a structural principle, cf. 4.1.3), including the gendered devaluation of admin work. As previously noted, participants rarely if ever appear to explicitly make sense of such episodes, and of the gendered devaluation of university admin work, as the manifestation of gender inequality. The next chapter critiques participants’ tendency to deny the relevance of gender in gender-imbalanced HEA as an element of what Gill and colleagues define as a ‘postfeminist sensibility at work’ (2017), ultimately working to repudiate gender inequality in HEA.

Chapter 10. Repudiating Gender Inequality in Family/Female-Friendly, Meritocratic HEA

Participants account for the horizontal and vertical gender imbalance in patterned ways discussed in Chapters 8 and 9, sometimes pointing to potentially discriminatory, or at least gender-differential, practices (e.g. recruitment/progression) and episodes. A contrasting but consistent tendency is for participants to deny that gender might be a factor in the imbalance or a dis/advantage in HEA, and/or state that the statistical data on the gender imbalance in HEA and at CSU are not representative of their experience:

Our management team are women... (1) the whole of the managing team apart from one man... so that is not. -- it is changing [...] I think... (HHH) higher education is a bit of a weird one coz I think it is mainly dominated by women rather than men.. so therefore there is more of an opportunity for women to progress (M13)

Despite statistical data evidence, M13 states that HE is 'dominated' by women, who have 'more of an opportunity' to progress than elsewhere.

This chapter explores participants' patterned accounts which eventually work to disavow the existence of gender inequality/discrimination in gender-imbalanced CSU/HEA. Section 10.1 discusses how participants distance themselves from the gender imbalance, for example by stating it is not reflective of their experience and locating it elsewhere (e.g. in other HE institutions or sectors). Section 10.2 critiques participants' tendency to explain the imbalance away with motherhood and childcare, simultaneously constructing men as more deserving of career progression in "female/family-friendly" HEA (10.3). Finally, Section 10.4 examines participants' tendency to construct HEA as already gender-egalitarian, and deny that gender may be relevant or at least a factor in the gender-imbalanced distribution of HEA staff.

These patterned accounts are strikingly similar to the patterned elements of a 'postfeminist sensibility' critiqued by Gill and colleagues (2017; cf. 3.4) as effectively making gender inequality/discrimination 'unspeakable' (Gill, 2014). This chapter argues that such accounts allow participants to navigate the paradoxical 'degree of segregation that remains in the face of the sector's gender equity initiatives' (Strachan et al, 2013: 217), and dominant 'rhetoric of collegiality' (Eveline 2004: 137) and egalitarianism.

10.1. Not now, not here, not that bad, not just in HEA

When asked to discuss the visual prompts showing numerical data on the gender imbalance in HEA and at CSU, participants frequently state that these data are not reflective of their own experience. They tend to account for the imbalance as the residual effect of historical occupational segregation, past discrimination or “traditional” gender roles (cf. 10.1.1). They re-locate the gender imbalance elsewhere, e.g. in other institutions/departments (cf. 10.1.2) and/or in the private sector (cf. 10.1.3), thus constructing CSU/HEA as “not that bad” compared to “the way the world is”. As argued by Gill and colleagues (2017), these can be interpreted as elements of a ‘postfeminist sensibility’ at work, working ideologically to close down opportunities for action and change.

10.1.1. Not now

Participants frequently account for the *current* gender imbalance as the residual effect of “historical”, “traditional” gender roles, and as such, as bound to change⁴⁹. For example, M10 talks about the presence of ‘old white men [...] in.. <@grey suits@>’ on the university senior management team as a ‘hangover’ from 20th-century gender inequality. In the FG3 excerpt below Peter accounts for the current gender imbalance in HEA by reference to the lack of educational opportunities that women had in the past:

- Peter: Although it's supposed to be a bit controversial erm... it could also be down to.. erm.. educational background.. coz you may find that.. in the years past.. females couldn't have the same... ability to potentially attend university or.. you know gain extra. education.. erm so they got to a certain point and then they were like.. off to secretarial school.. or whatever [...] whereas now I think over the last... however many years [...] obviously they are making inroads [...]
- Gabby: [So do you think that]
- Peter: [It just wasn't..] it just wasn't open to them..
- Gabby: With education this.. is gonna possibly.. change?
- Peter: Yeah... I think so.. I mean it's being seen already that you know.. even if you look at you know... the FTSE 100 companies and whazzit.. -- there are three companies now that are headed by women CEOs? so you know I think it is slowly but surely getting there.. but I think that historically [...] these occupations I think they've always been predominantly women-orientated or women-focused.. maybe due to... the lack of educational opportunities that they had when they were younger
- All: ... (2)
- Camille: Maybe lack of ambition as well erm... historically [...] it would be interesting to see now what.. are the ambitions and aspirations of the <@younger@> [*looks at Natalie and Jodie*] administrators..

(FG3)

⁴⁹ Chapter 9 already provided some examples of this tendency.

Peter's description of the lack of educational opportunities available to women in the past, and of the historical perception of admin and secretarial work as "women's work", goes hand in hand with his construction of the present as much more gender-egalitarian. Women are now allegedly making inroads in every occupational sector. The fact that 3 FTSE100 companies are led by women is constructed as 'slowly but surely getting there'. Change has happened already – Peter corrects me when I ask him if this is *going to* change, by pointing out how 'it's being seen already'.

This account implies that the gender imbalance that statistical data show in HEA is also bound to change soon, being the remnant of past educational inequalities and lack of ambition on the part of women. The future generations of female administrators (e.g. Natalie and Jodie, to whom Camille refers) will not have to face these issues, because, as 'the next generation of vice-chancellors and.. executive teams comes about', there will inevitably be 'more of a balance' (M10).

Sexism – albeit rarely if ever called that way – and discriminatory views are only ever displayed by male colleagues of another generation:

Laura: I don't know if it's... (2) age difference... [...] which is what I was saying about the joke from the academic about typing up.. it used to... -- and now everyone is... using a computer and.. that came from somebody.. where.. you did have to copy-type everything but now.. everyone's just doing their.. their own.. thing and we don't.. get asked those kinds of requests anymore

(FG8)

M6: When I arrived it was all very different then as well because... the academics were a lot more old-school than they are these days so they were very much.. kind of yeah.. (HH) the traditional professors that.. I suppose did <@act in a way that I thought they would@> they were kind of.. (H) more hierarchical then and more like "oh.. you <@you do the filing I do@> ... this stuff".. (HH) whereas it's not like that anymore at all I don't think.. but yeah at the time it was kind of.. quite a traditional kind of.. (HH) "this is.. what you do <@you work for me kind of thing"@> [...] I think it was.. the a:ge I think... more than.. – [...] it's just that sometimes the way they spoke... <@how they spoke to women rather than.. actually job titles@>

In the first example above, Laura is again referring to 'the older chap', whose 'joke' about giving the typing exclusively to female administrators was discussed in 9.3. Here Laura re-constructs this male academic's behaviour as 'generational'. Thanks to 'great technological change', nowadays everyone does their own typing, and 'jokes' like this are isolated episodes which only ever involve academics like the 'older chap'. M6 dates the defeat of sexism as very recent: when she started working at CSU about a decade ago, male academics treated female administrators in a very 'hierarchical

way', because back then they were 'old-school' and 'traditional'. Nowadays, 'it's not like that anymore at all'.

It is not just attitudes and behaviours that have changed: the gender imbalance is also much less polarised than it used to be, participants argue. There are many more women at the top, and many more men on lower grades:

M9: I think things are changing.. you know when I joined the university 25 years ago.. these [G2 and G3] would be... up.. they could be close to.. 90% [...] Oh and there [G6 and G7].. it would be a 100% and a 100% so if I look at 25 years ago... (3) this is good.. it's good.. the change is good yeah.. and things are changing [...] because society is changing

L6: I do think it's changed.. quite a lot.. there's definitely more men I think.. when I first started here there was only.. <@two men working in the kind of@>.. (HH) course administrator roles

Compared to 25 (or even 10, as in L6's case) years ago, things have changed, and this – i.e. the current gender imbalance – is 'good', M9 repeats three times. Besides, the imbalance is still changing and will change even further in the next few years, when we will certainly, participants argue, reach gender balance on all grades without really having to do anything about it:

Andrea: But the thing is.. in.. how many years' time, it'll probably be... [*inaudible*] down the middle.. because... men... apply for these roles now.. going back into time.. it wasn't considered -- I know we're going back to the gender stereotypes and man's role.. but it's not looked or frowned upon... if a young male or an older male decides to go for one of these jobs so.. I think that over time.. that will.. it will be a bit more.. balanced on both sides..

[...]
Jasmin: These [*i.e. G6/7*] are people that have been in that role for so long.. that it was just normal to have men... in those roles and since it's so difficult... for f.... -- not specifically for women it's that it's just so difficult for anyone to break that barrier... at the moment... they've just been there for so long.. that's just how it is.. we can't change that now.. until obviously people who are in those roles currently decide to move on... And then at that point.. there's the opportunity for other people to walk in... to take over those roles and then at that point it'll be interesting to see what the distribution is like... once... <@the lifers have... moved on@>

(FG4)

Gender stereotypes and gender roles are something that belongs to the past, Andrea argues, and no longer exist nowadays. This means that, 'over time', we will inevitably reach a better gender balance 'on both sides'. Jasmin attributes the gender imbalance at the top to the fact that in the past 'it was just normal to have men... in those roles'. Nowadays, the imbalance is still there simply because these 'lifers' are not leaving, making it hard for 'anyone', 'not specifically for women', to break that barrier. The

solution is easy, and does not require any action whatsoever: it involves patiently waiting until the lifers have retired, because 'we can't change that now'.

The 'pasting' (Tasker and Negra, in Gill et al. 2017: 227) of inequalities and discrimination allows participants to highlight how much more gender egalitarian the present is (Gill, 2014; Gill et al, 2017), how much progress we have made already, and how bright the future looks if we are just patient enough to wait. This patterned account thus works to ideological effects: it sustains the gender-imbalanced status quo and diminishes the rationale for action (cf. Gill et al, 2017; Wetherell et al, 1987).

10.1.2. Not here

Often, national data are said not to represent participants' experience at CSU:

Jack: It's quite high.. I'm surprised..
Calvin: Maybe we are a bit isolated.. [inaudible]
Jack: [how] female-dominated it is
Rob: It's probably not our experience so..
Jack: Well I'd say because I'm -- again, that's the way -- how it works in other universities.. in [smaller UK town] I was the one of only two.. in a team of 25.. that were male.. so I think it's.. definitely more skewed here towards more of a balance.. than maybe in other.. -- but that's only my personal experience but [...] there were certainly people in my last job that had been working in the role for 20 years.. doing the same thing with no.. real aspiration to go anywhere

(FG1)

Participants account for the gender imbalance that numerical data show exists by locating it elsewhere, in other universities or (smaller) towns. The imbalance which is said to exist "over there" can in turn be accounted for as the result of "people", i.e. women, having 'no aspiration to go anywhere'.

Participants working in a School comprising a specific set of disciplines tend to locate the vertical gender imbalance in other Schools or departments:

Anna: Yeah I agree with Kat.. in my previous university I totally see this but here... it is slightly different in the School
Amala: Yeah in the School.. like I was saying earlier, it's not quite like this... but in the university highly..
Anna: I think maybe it's because it's [name of discipline]
[...]
Amala: Empathy, empathy, empathy
All: @
Kat: Maybe if we were in like.. engineering or something.. it might be completely different

(FG2)

M8: School-wise I don't think we do badly.. cos it's women.. focused you know what I mean.. I think except the [Head] and maybe a couple of blokes.. there's quite a lot of women here

Participants construct their own experience as an exception, this time not geographical but discipline-related. This enables them to claim that the imbalance is not reflective of their experience and at the same time account for its existence by locating it elsewhere (e.g. in the School of Engineering, a typically male discipline).

Locating the gender imbalance elsewhere appears to be a useful way for managers to negotiate their stake when accounting for an imbalance they might be partly seen as (or feel accused of) being responsible for:

Even when I get applications for grade 2 and 3 jobs.. (H) it tends to be 70% women applications at least I think... (HH) I'm quite lucky I have an.. equally split team of male and female but... that is quite rare.. at the bottom (M2)

M2 defines herself as 'lucky' to have a gender-balanced team, which she describes as a 'rare' situation. Several managers, however, construct their own team as an exception to the general rule, thus locating the imbalance elsewhere.

Interestingly, it is not just line-managers or CSU line-managers who locate the imbalance elsewhere, but also participants who do not line-manage or are line-managers elsewhere:

- M11: I don't think those top three levels.. are actually that representative of this as an institution? I have not kind of.. I haven't experienced.. that kind of environment [...] if anything arguably the reverse.. [...] although I appreciate the very very top of it.. in CSU is still.. (H) a little bit male-dominated?... (1) but it's not too bad.. I think as an institution we're not.. that bad..
- Gabby: [...] and what about.. the.. bottom bit.. [...] do you think it's more female-dominated..
- M11: Well... (HHx) yeah.. it is.. but again that's not erm... (1) I don't think.. that is necessarily representative.. of what I've seen
- L5: Yeah.. yeah.. although here.. in this office... (1) we're not far from half and half actually in administration.. so CSU definitely?.. that would be like that.. but here actually we've got quite a few men.. yeah

M11 constructs CSU as an exception and argues that the imbalance is not representative of his experience. Although he concedes that lower-grades are female-dominated, this happens elsewhere, not at CSU. As for CSU's top grades, these are 'a little bit male-dominated' but not as much as elsewhere (also cf. 10.3). L5 relocates the imbalance not just anywhere else, but at CSU, thus constructing her current team as an exception and CSU as representative of the national trend.

The aim here is not to contest what participants say is reflective (or not) of their experience, but to critique the effects of this patterned account. Locating the imbalance elsewhere, and constructing CSU, one's own School or team as an

exception ultimately also “moves away” and relocates the responsibility for action: if the imbalance is “not here”, action needs to be taken elsewhere. Gill and colleagues (2017) come to analogous conclusions when critiquing their participants’ tendency to locate gender inequalities elsewhere (which they call ‘the spatial view’).

This study’s participants do not simply move the imbalance away from CSU, their School or team, but also from the HEA sector. This they achieve by constructing HEA as not “that bad” when compared to the male-dominated corporate world.

10.1.3. Not that bad, not just in HEA, the way the world is

HE and HEA in particular are consistently constructed as “female-friendly” employment sectors, especially when compared to the private or corporate world of work:

Gabby: Can you think of any reasons why.. so many women and so few men may be doing these jobs..

L4: I don't know maybe it's because it's actually very difficult for women to get jobs elsewhere.. a:nd.. it unfortunately is still a fairly.. male-dominated world.. in other professions I think.. so it's quite possible that... higher education is maybe.. not necessarily more open to hiring women.. but actually... we all just flock there because... (1) there's nowhere else for us to go [...] especially kind of living.. in [*big UK city*]?... you're surrounded by.. a lot of corporate kind of.. organisations? and I think.. predominantly.. the men flock there.. and are probably more accepted there

L1: I can see... a kind of.. male-dominated.. managing structure which I think happens.. not just in universities but everywhere.. and then... I guess there's an over-representation of.. females? at this level? so I guess there's a glass ceiling?... but at least here it looks more eq -- more female.. than other industries in terms of like.. going up to the top..

Beck: I... had a conversation with a colleague about this very... (1) issue who works at grade 3 as I am and he says he really feels that at CSU... women are so well represented here and.. that's just. that is completely not the case @... but you do see – you see it because actually.. maybe in the public sector.. women are better represented and maternity.. and things like that are easiest.. there are a lot of women here and some have of them do have senior positions

(FG6)

HEA is regularly constructed as a female-friendly sector (often as a consequence of its construction as family-friendly, cf. 10.2). This is used to account for the horizontal gender imbalance, as women are said to ‘flock’ into HEA (entry level roles) having ‘nowhere else’ to go (apart from nursing, L4). Women’s entry into HEA is again constructed as residual, the only option they have after men have made their employment choices.

This construction of HEA as a female-friendly sector is also drawn upon to frame the *vertical* gender imbalance as “not that bad” when compared to the male-dominated corporate sector women are allegedly driven away from. As L1 puts it, the vertical gender imbalance is ‘everywhere’, but at least in HEA ‘some’ women, i.e. those who are ‘workaholics’ or ‘very competent’ can ‘go up to the top’. In the excerpt above, Beck appears to contest this construction, yet she acknowledges its ideological force (‘but you do see – you see it’): part of the public sector, family-friendly HEA is a place where women(as-mothers) are more supported and fare better than elsewhere (also cf. 10.2). The oft-cited opposition between public vs. private sector (with HE considered as part of the former despite ongoing marketisation and corporatisation, cf. 2.1) is thus reframed as gendered.

What Gill and colleagues call a ‘c’est la vie’ account (2017: 227), whereby participants appear to accept the status quo as “just the way things are”, is also regularly co-produced by this study’s participants:

Yokow: But this is not just higher education I'd like to say.. this is.. this is..
the world
(FG5)

M13: I don't know <@what I think about this@>... cos obviously we've never had a female.. [*head of CSU*]... (1.5) so... (1) but we've only ever had... (1) one female... (1.5) Prime Minister⁵⁰.. so I think... (1.5) that kind of does reflect what's happening in the outside world

If HEA as a sector is doing better than – or just as badly as – the rest of the world (both of work and generally), then the rationale for action is diminished (a point also made by Gill et al, 2017). Change has to happen at a broader societal level, and trickle down to HEA:

Gabby: Which of these if any.. erm.. do you think would be the most effective measures to.. address this.. gender imbalance
M9: ... (33) no
Gabby: hm mm?
M9: ... (2) no no
Gabby: Okay
M9: ... (HH) becau:se I think... (1) I think it's a step change... and you could... (HH) job-sharing... (4) paternity leave.. shadowing.. I mean a lot of these... have existed for quite some time [...] no no.. actually no [*hands the list back to me*] no.. no... (1) I think it's society I think it's culture

Rob: It's about.. attitudes and perceptions isn't it.. it's still... widely held that.. -- the attitude that you wanna be the breadwinner.. become the main

⁵⁰ This was in 2015, i.e. before Theresa May’s government.

breadwinner.. and.. I think that... plays into.. this.. gender.. distribution... until that changes.. things are gonna be... the same [...]

James: Like Rob said it doesn't really strike me as being.. unique to CSU or the university anyway.. that's not to say that obviously.. CSU can afford to turn a blind eye to this cos it's seen as a national problem... but I mean.. I don't know.. it's a difficult one cos I mean.. if you had the answers to this then you would have the answer... for everyone to a certain extent

(FG1)

After a remarkable 33 seconds of silence, M9 hands back to me the list of initiatives already being put in place in the sector to address the gender imbalance. Shifting the responsibility for change to 'society' and 'culture', because the gender imbalance is everywhere and not just, or not that bad, in HEA, implies not having to drive that process of change. Similarly, in FG1 Rob attributes the imbalance to the expectation of men to be the breadwinner. Instead of contributing to shifting gendered expectations, universities should just wait for change to happen on a broader societal level. Besides, if we had the answer to the CSU/HEA gender imbalance issue, James argues, we would have the answer for everyone. Universities and their staff are constructed in these accounts as genuinely powerless: change is simply beyond their remit.

A similar effect is achieved by those participants who, as in the following FG7 extract, account for the imbalance as the result of natural, essential, and thus unchangeable gender differences (also cf. Chapters 8 & 9):

Monica: That's the world!

Nikki: Yeah

Monica: [It will never change!]

Nikki: [Yeah yeah yeah yeah] yeah

Monica: Not in a million years!

Nikki: Well.. that's a bad attitude

[...]

Monica: In any in any environment.. work environment.. but it happens in [*Nikki's country*] as well

Nikki: Oh yeah! oh yeah..

Monica: So..

Nikki: That's everywhere=

Monica: =Because women are different from men! that's it.. that's nature.. you can't change it!

(FG7)

The gender imbalance is here accounted for, and naturalised, as "the way the world is" because of "natural" gender differences which we cannot change and should simply accept.

The next section looks at a strikingly regular rhetorical move made by participants which eventually works to naturalise the gender imbalance: answering about *mothers* when asked about *women*. Constructing all women in HEA as mothers, participants explain the imbalance away as the result of natural(ised) life events such as motherhood and childcare.

10.2. Women have babies!

Childbearing capacity is seen as the ultimate sex difference. Its socially constructed consequence, i.e. society's disproportionate allocation of childcare to mothers, is often naturalised as the result of women's mothering "instinct", i.e. their allegedly natural predisposition to be caring and nurturing (cf. 3.2). Participants' tendency to answer about mothers when asked about the over-/under-representation of *women* in HEA and at CSU is here discussed as a rhetorical move which works to ideological effects. Constructing all women in HEA as mothers naturalises the gender imbalance and legitimises it as "just the way it is": as common sense, inevitable and unchangeable.

This rhetorical move effectively enables participants to get away without answering about *women*, and/or women who are not mothers. It presupposes that women may only ever be disadvantaged as and when they become mothers, thus constructing motherhood and childcare as 'the issue' (Gill, 2014: 510):

- Gabby: Can you think of any.. examples where being a woman has been an advantage or a barrier.. in university administration
M2: For me? or... generally.. erm... (4) well... (5.5) well... not for me at the moment.. because.. I'm not married and I don't have children⁵¹

When gender inequality is hinted at, it is constructed so as to appear as "natural" as childbearing:

You <@could argue@> that.. that's in general.. (HHH) gender equality.. -- usually.. a woman takes.. maternity leave.. which interrupts her career.. usually takes more responsibilities around the child... (HHH) so she's... less focused on her career... so it's.. it is... (1) it's not just.. erm... <@ it is @ you could say@> gender inequality.. that they end up in sort of... less... paid.. jobs and.. are not.. so focused on their career or they can't be.. necessarily (L2)

L2 does not actually "name" gender inequality, she states that *you could argue* it is. Women-as-mothers' "disadvantage" is reframed as the way things unfortunately but "necessarily", thus inevitably, are.

⁵¹ M2 has just told the "girly biscuits" episode (cf. 9.3); interestingly, she does not refer back to this episode as an example of gender-based disadvantage.

The aim of this section is not to diminish the impact that motherhood and childcare undoubtedly have on women's (working) lives. Rather, with Gill (2014), this patterned account is critiqued in that it allows participants to explain the gender imbalance away in a common-sense and thus irrefutable way, deny the existence of gender inequality, and close down opportunities for action. The next sub-sections discuss examples where participants answer about mothers to account for both women's overrepresentation in HEA generally and in admin roles specifically, i.e. the horizontal imbalance (cf. 10.2.1), and their under-representation in senior roles, i.e. the vertical imbalance (10.2.2).

10.2.1. Accounting for the horizontal imbalance: women-as-mothers in university *admin work*

When accounting for the horizontal imbalance, participants regularly draw on the afore-mentioned public vs. private sector binary opposition (also cf. 10.1.3), constructing HEA as a family- and *therefore* female-friendly sector. According to this frequent account, women-as-mothers are attracted to HEA roles because, as a public sector employers, universities offer perks and benefits which particularly suit them. Women are thus said to 'flock' to HEA not only because 'there's nowhere else' for them to go (L4, cf. 10.1.3), but also because they can count on 'things that you probably wouldn't get in other industries' (Jack, FG1):

flexible working.. job-share policies.. generous sick pay.. leave and holiday...
and... (3) that kind of security (L1)

In terms of maternity pay and... flexible working... in public sector institutions like
universities we're more likely to... have things in place for that... than say..
corporate [*workplaces*] (Samya, FG2)

In addition to flexibility (discussed below), 'security' and 'stability', i.e. some of the not strictly work-related positives of working in HEA (cf. 6.2), are consistently reframed as "gendered" incentives. HEA is said to provide 'safe' jobs for women who (want to) have children:

Calvin: Another probable reason is.. all the people that have come back
after pregnancy.. they've kept their jobs?.. whereas when I used to
work in [*the private sector*].. women would go away.. to <@have
their baby@> and would be given the shit -- sorry.. the terrible job
when they came back.. and it was kind of to force them away so I
think.. probably a lot of other industries are like that.. they.. (HH)
have that sexist.. (HHx) notion that.. women are only gonna join and
then they're gonna have their baby and then.. go off again.. so they
try and force them out

M4: This.. for women is a safe job to have in higher education if you're planning to have children [...] compared to.. the private sector because [...] I mean we have had so many maternity leaves.. but I don't think we.. see that as a problem or something that we think about when we're recruiting... so it's quite a safe one for.. (H) women of a <@certain age@>.. a:nd.. they feel that they can't be discriminated... cos I think women... again I'm stereotyping.. maybe think a bit more about security... and men maybe think a bit more about.. "where can I... -- what can I achieve"... but that is.. <@gross stereotyping@>... because obviously there are some really ambitious women out there.. then they would get into the private sector I suppose

Drawing on a gender difference discourse, M4 admittedly stereotypes women as more interested in job security and men as more career-driven: ambitious women would work in the private sector, not in HEA. On the other hand, HEA is a good workplace for (less ambitious) women of 'a certain age', i.e. (future) mothers, because it is a gender/pregnancy discrimination-free work environment – especially compared to the private sector. Attributing that 'sexist notion' to private employers, Calvin also simultaneously constructs HEA as a sector where pregnancy discrimination and sexism do not exist.

When discussing the gendered devaluation of university admin, Chapter 9 also explored what Beck defines as "the typing pool stereotype" (FG6): the assumption that women work in university admin because admin work is easy, repetitive and mundane. The typing pool stereotype is regularly evoked when accounting for the over-representation of women-as-mothers in HE admin roles. University admin is constructed as work so easy that it can be done alongside family commitments, without compromising women-as-mothers' performance in either paid or unpaid work. This is used to account for why so many women 'flock' to these entry-level positions rather than more specialised work (or higher-grade roles, cf. 10.2.2):

As a sector in general it appeals to women more than men anyway... I think compared to certain... well a lot of sectors.. higher education is incredibly... favourable and amenable towards flexible working patterns.. which definitely appeals to.. women and maternity leave needs and what have you [...] I guess.. these jobs [*i.e. lower-level admin roles*] may be seen as being.. erm... (2) less kind of like.. stressful? in general? so.. easier.. you know to juggle with other.. kind of.. demands family demands childcare demands... (1) I'm not saying of course that those <@aren't demands that should be@> @ experienced by the male as well but... yeah I don't know that's about all I can really think about (M11)

M11 euphemistically defines lower-level admin roles as less 'stressful' (i.e. difficult, demanding) than others, and thus as jobs which allow women-as-mothers to easily

juggle 'family' and 'childcare demands'. Interestingly, M11 distances himself from what might be perceived as a "traditional" view of gender roles, but not from the typing pool stereotype. This he draws upon as all he 'can really think about' to account for the horizontal gender imbalance in HEA. The dominant societal and sectorial (gendered) devaluation of admin work thus appears to be a palatable way to account for the imbalance, one that is reinforced by the imbalance itself: university admin work *must* be easy work if so many women-as-mothers do it (and do not progress from it, cf. 10.2.2).

The typing pool stereotype is also drawn upon to construct university admin roles as more flexible than e.g. management roles, and, therefore, as more suitable for women-as-mothers. Because university admin work is constructed as easy, mundane, repetitive work, it can be broken down into smaller 'routine clerical tasks' (Whitchurch, 2004a: 282) and therefore provide women-as-mothers with flexible/part-time work. Flexibility – including job-sharing/part-time work, leaving early (or rather, on time, cf. 10.2.2) or starting late (e.g. at 9:30 instead of 9) in order to drop children off at school – are consistently reframed as gendered perks of working not in HEA *generally*, but in lower-level admin roles *exclusively*. These roles are discursively constructed as the *only* type of roles which can be done "flexibly" in HEA:

Some of these jobs give the flexibility as well for example if you have kids.. and we have to be honest with ourselves... maybe you can come in later... or leave earlier because you have to pick up your kids and everything.. the way all the roles have evolved maybe.. that's why more women.. were attracted to these types of roles as well... so it was not only being excluded from.. other roles (Yokow, FG5)

I can imagine if you.. as a woman.. having children and then coming back and needing to have flexibility and part-time work... that kind of thing might well be the only thing that's available for you (Jodie, FG3)

As Yokow puts it, stressing the common-sense nature of her account, 'we have to be honest with ourselves': women are over-represented in lower-level university admin jobs because in these roles they can work "flexibly" or part-time, which allows them to do the school run. These jobs 'might well be the only thing that's available' for women-as-mothers returning to work in "family/female-friendly" HEA. Simultaneously, women-as-mothers are constructed as the *only* type of employee needing flexible, part-time work/job sharing:

I guess these roles allow for.. flexible working? more?... for people – women sorry.. <@women who want children@>... and who would tend to work.. maybe on.. more flexible.. working hours (L7)

Out of the eight FG3 and FG5 participants (who co-produced the discussions on p.217) only one was, at the time of the data collection, working part-time due to childcare commitments; out of 56 research participants, only three mentioned motherhood and childcare as one of their reasons to enter university administration. Data on CSU's maternity rates show that fewer than 40 female PS staff (out of over a thousand) went on maternity leave in 2015 (of whom 84% – so *not all* – returned to work). Of these women, a minority – only 40% – were on G2/G3, and this percentage includes not just admin staff, but generalist *and* specialist staff. This of course means that the majority of female CSU PS staff who “had babies” in 2015 were on management and senior management grades; similarly, on these grades were the only three roles being carried out as job-shares at CSU in the same year. Data also show that only 17.6% of *all* CSU female PS staff worked on a part-time basis (i.e. between 0.2 and 0.8FTE). Yet, this does not prevent participants from explaining the gender imbalance away as a result of motherhood and childcare, and of women-as-mothers’ “need”/“choice” to work flexibly/part-time.

Interestingly, homeworking is omitted from these accounts, although it is a common (albeit not always successful) way for parents and carers to “juggle” their responsibilities. As recent evidence suggests, university administrators, especially those in student-facing roles, are usually *not* allowed to work from home (due to ‘business needs’, cf. Tong, 2014). Therefore, the absence of homeworking from these accounts is meaningful: its presence would problematise an otherwise seamless account. M4 is the only participant who mentions homeworking, and she does so to contest the legitimacy of the (vertical) gender imbalance:

In a way... the more senior you are the less [*working flexibly*] should be a problem... because.. down here I need my people to be at their desk and be available for students... 9 to 5 I cannot let them work from home I can't give them flexibility you know... I have a little bit of sort of flexibility for childcare but that's limited [*to one employee working 10-6*].. but the further up you come.. the more you can work from home the less you're needed actually to be in the office... so actually in a way.. thinking about it.. it should be easier for women.. to work in the higher positions (M4)

M4 argues that she cannot give her team flexibility, because they need to be available for students and staff 9-5. From her recent national survey, Tong (2014) also found that administrators rarely enjoy the same terms and conditions as their managers and academic colleagues, including the availability of (in)formal flexible working arrangements. This is not to say that M11's statement that ‘higher education is incredibly... favourable and amenable towards flexible working’ is necessarily untrue (although Tong's (2014) evidence contests his claim). However, constructing lower-

level admin roles as the *only* roles which can be done flexibly in HEA is contrary to research evidence, and is based on their devaluation as easy, mundane, routine jobs. This works ideologically to account for, naturalise and thus legitimise the horizontal gender imbalance.

Participants also explain the *vertical* gender imbalance away as the result of motherhood and childcare. They do so by constructing flexible working as exclusively required by women-as-mothers and simultaneously unsuitable for higher-grade roles.

10.2.2. Accounting for the vertical imbalance: women-as-mothers in *lower-level* university admin work

Since lower-level admin roles are constructed as the *only* HEA roles which can be done flexibly/part-time, what participants often call women-as-mothers' "choice" or "need" to work flexibly and/or part-time is used to account for the vertical gender imbalance:

Kat: Across the university there's probably a lot of women like... having babies [...] if you've got a family and potentially you might be looking to like... work part-time.. you're not going to go for a massive promotion are you.. you may need... flexible hours

(FG2)

M8: If you look at my thing.. I was stuck on grade 2 and 3 for a long time because it was flexible you know I could leave at 5... (HH) and it <@ it hardly happens these days @> [...] career-wise there only so much you can do while the kids are small... so you kind of focus more on doing sort of.. 9 to 5 jobs and go home

Flexible/part-time working is constructed as intrinsically unsuitable for higher-grade jobs and therefore as inevitably hindering career progression. Interestingly, working 'flexibly' is in M8's quote reframed as working 9-5, i.e. rather inflexible, but predictable hours, and being able to leave the office on time. This might suggest a tendency to revalue 'traditional' patterns of full-time work, which are being eroded by the intensification and extensification of work scholars have noted as a typical feature of neoliberal workplaces (e.g. Gill & Donaghue, 2016). Standard hours become 'flexible working' if 'the expectation of higher grades is to work long hours' (M1).

Wallace and Marchant (2011) noted a widespread attitude, even in "family-friendly" HE(A), against part-time/flexible working in management roles, interpreted as a sign of lower commitment. Managers in this study also construct flexibility as unsuitable for higher-responsibility roles:

M2: It might also be the women that have got stuck who've had kids and are part-time.. and you're more likely to see job-shares at that grade? [...]

it's less vital if you -- [...] because you're.. you're doing a function rather than.. designing the strategy so... (HH) so it's having someone there and it could be two people sharing rather than.. one person in constantly

- L6: (HH) God job-sharing on higher grades... (1) I have to say that fills me with horror [...] it's okay... if say it's a junior role and you can say "oh right I'll manage these events and you'll manage those events".. [...] but when you're a policy maker? you can't have two different people.. making radically different decisions

Women "get stuck" on lower grades because the functions covered by these roles are constructed as 'not vital' compared to those fulfilled by higher-grade, strategic roles, and can thus be split up into job-shares/part-time work. These roles are about having 'someone there'; this someone can be anyone. Enabling flexible working in decision-making roles is simultaneously constructed as impossible or detrimental: these roles are said to require '*one person in constantly*'.

As noted in 9.2.3, motherhood and childcare are mentioned as the reason behind the drop in the percentage of women both between CSU G3 and G4 and between CSU G5 and G6:

- Stacey: It could be on a really really general basis that.. you.. leave uni or you leave school and you go into this [*i.e.* G2].. you progress to this [*i.e.* G3] by the time you get to this age.. it's the age where a lot of women go off to have babies and therefore they take time out.. and in that time the men.. they can progress.. but then the women.. come to a bit of a stalemate and then it's really difficult to get back up on the ladder and also once you do get back.. you've got other commitments and.. they take over

(FG5)

- James: Would that be stating the obvious that by the time.. potentially [...] you would expect that maybe around the age when someone would be getting to a grade 5.. they're doing.. reasonably well in their career.. it would be about the time that they would.. decide to have babies.. I guess.. I don't know

- Calvin: Yeah cos maybe it is sexism it's.. I mean.. even though it's female-dominated.. [*in the sector..*]

- James: [I mean.. it might not be sexism.. I mean it's just.. @ [*inaudible*]

- Calvin: [Oh no but I mean] more like.. it's more... yeah this is where you start to have.. children so fewer.. fewer females are selected for the.. higher roles..

- Rob: Discrimination

- Calvin: Yeah.. even though we have... (2) better=

- James: =Or like you say as well if you do make it to grade 5.. it's a pretty good salary to go on maternity leave isn't it?

- Jack: @

(FG1)

The age group of "women having babies" is clustered by Stacey on G3 and by James on G5. In both examples, it is motherhood which accounts for women's difficulty in

progressing from those two grades – not the fact, for example, that these correspond to two key career transition points at CSU (and in HEA generally). The second excerpt is particularly interesting because of the way sexism/discrimination is initially acknowledged by Calvin (and perhaps Rob) and then immediately denied by James. James suggests that the reason behind the stark drop in the proportion of women at G6 may rather lie in the financial incentives of taking maternity leave on G5. The vertical gender imbalance is therefore not due to sexism or discrimination, which cannot possibly exist in family/female-friendly HEA: accounting for it means simply ‘stating the obvious’, i.e. that “women have babies”.

Women-as-mothers’ lack of career progression is constructed as a situation so inevitable that nobody cannot do anything about until ‘the children grow up’:

Victoria: For women [...] their career has... not stalled... but it's remained.. in a certain position... because.. their commitments at home or.. elsewhere have meant that they haven't been able to put in.. the time... of an equivalent male colleague [...] purely because of time
[...]

Joan: It does stall.. your career being a woman be-- if you have a family.. or other commitments outside because of [...] the time that you take out [...] you get to a certain point where.. in order to progress further you need to commit more... you can't be having the constraints that you have at home [...] but it might just be for a set period of time.. I mean they can progress later when the children grow up or whatever

(FG4)

M8: I used to juggle so many balls and I wanted to be.. juggling good <@at every single ball.. but I would let a few slip! because I'm not superhuman@>.. and it took me a long time to realise that.. cos I used to feel guilty all the time [...] so you kind of.. learn to... appreciate the fact that you can't be.. good at every.. -- can't juggle every single ball in your hand.. so I appreciate the pressure.. women have on.. to achieve those things.. and maintain it basically.. but I wouldn't say men are favoured more cos I haven't seen it

If presenteeism and longer working hours are the taken-for-granted pre-requisites for progression, women-as-mothers simply cannot commit the time required to progress their career: this is accepted as “the way things are”. Women need to ‘learn to... appreciate’ that they are ‘not superhuman’ (M8). Gender inequality and discrimination are repudiated in family-/female-friendly HEA as women-as-mothers are said to be lagging behind ‘*purely because of time*’ (FG4): the time they have taken off work and the extra-time they are not able to commit once back in work.

It is, reportedly, purely because of time that women-as-mothers miss ‘the promotion boat’, i.e. progression opportunities that men are instead “around” to grab:

There's a period of time when.. you're not at work full-time you... miss.. that kind of... promotion... boat as it were and then before you know it you're kind of out of the loop a little bit.. and you don't... potentially get to progress [...] that's got to be a link to it I would imagine... you know women having babies [...] I don't believe that... this is necessarily the organisation's fault... it's.. your own thing you know.. I've got lots of friends that are having babies at the moment and they're going back to work but they want to go back.. (HH).. part-time.. they don't want to go back to.. to more responsibilities they've got more than enough of that <@at home@>.. they just want to.. go to work pay their nursery bills.. (HHH) and get home for their child.. that's their priority.. and that I think should be their priority... if I was a mother anyway.. though I think I'd want to have a... career.. but my career would change (M13)

As M13 puts it, it is not necessarily the organisation's fault – it is women-as-mothers' "choice" to have children and return to work flexibly which hinders their career progression: higher-responsibility roles simply require that time and commitment. As gender inequality is repudiated, women-as-mothers are implicitly blamed for stop-starting their career, whilst at the time commended for doing "what should be done", i.e. prioritising childcare.

A few participants offer a more critical account of the consequences of maternity and childcare on women's career, and a few do hint at potential discriminatory practices (e.g. Kat in FG2, and Efi in FG7) or at the stereotypical tendency to associate women with childcare and looking after their husband and relatives (e.g. L1; M12). The overwhelming tendency is for participants to accept structural barriers as "the way things are". If women-as-mothers want to progress in HEA, their only option is to 'lean in' (Sandberg, 2013, cf. Adamson, 2017, for a critique):

What I've seen with my friends is that unless they're very determined and take a lean-in attitude? [...] "I'm gonna be part of this I'm not gonna let... my.. motherhood.. stall my career".. then often... they willingly look at this [*i.e. lower-level HE admin roles*] as a good way of being a mother but also earning some money (L6)

If they are unable/unwilling to 'lean in', women-as-mothers willingly look at lower-level, devalued admin work as a 'good' compromise. Both these options are framed as individual "choices"; neither involves structural changes.

L6 subsequently states in her interview that 'you can't explain it all away with.. motherhood': participants overwhelmingly tend to do so, however. By constructing all women in HEA as mothers, they get away without talking about, therefore moving the focus away from, (other determinants of) gender inequality/discrimination. Women-as-mothers are consistently constructed as lacking the time, mental and physical energy to progress in HEA. Ultimately though, women-as-mothers are said to be lagging behind for reasons other than simply time-related:

I think it goes back to... women having [...] children.. having to have that time.. because obviously a lot of these high jobs.. you'd think would need to have a lot of experience behind them [...] so men have obviously been able to be in the working environment for a lot longer than maybe some women (Anna, FG2)

Men are here described as getting ahead not simply by virtue of “being around” when opportunities arise. They are constructed as deserving these opportunities, because they were able to accumulate the experience required to be promoted while women were on maternity leave or doing the school run. The next sub-section discusses participants’ tendency to account for the gender imbalance by drawing on a discourse of meritocracy, legitimising it not just as “the way things naturally are” but also as “the way they *should* be”.

10.3. The meritocracy discourse: ‘you gotta get the best person for the job’

A rhetoric of meritocracy and egalitarianism is particularly strong in HE, as academia is considered to be founded and operate on the basis of an allegedly objective principle of merit (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Sliwa & Johannsson, 2013). Chapter 8 discussed how participants tend to construct women as the ideal university admin worker, accounting for the horizontal gender imbalance in terms of their being deservedly over-represented in these roles. When it comes to accounting for the vertical gender imbalance in female-friendly, egalitarian HEA, openly stating that men are better and thus deserve to be overrepresented in leadership roles is not a discursive option without consequences⁵² – especially for male participants. Kelan argues, with Billig (1991), that as openly ‘sexist subject positions are no longer tenable [...] people find new ways to express sexism through structures that appear non-sexist’ (2009a: 180), even gender-egalitarian.

One such acceptable, palatable, and apparently gender-egalitarian way to achieve the same (sexist) effects is offered by a discourse of meritocracy:

I suppose when you get to the really senior positions... there comes a point where you.. start looking at like.. serious levels of experience and expertise... or what have you.. so.. I guess that's where... you would see.. or that's where it just seemed to be.. that men have got that advantage basically because.. they maybe have been working for much longer period of time.. a steady period of time to build in more experience and so have been able to demonstrate that.. I think our industry [...] is maybe still slightly lopsided.. but that's not always [...] necessarily a problem or a bad thing.. you recruit the best person into the role whatever your options are available at that time (M11)

⁵² Though cf. 9.2: M9’s quote is one of the very few explicit examples of participants accounting for the vertical imbalance by stating that men are better managers and leaders.

Like Anna (cf. quote on p.223) and several other participants, M11 constructs the gender imbalance as not ‘necessarily a problem or a bad thing’. He reframes it as a “side effect” of recruitment/promotion decisions based exclusively on objective merit criteria such as “experience” (also cf. FG3 extract, p.225). It just so happens that the “best people”, i.e. those who have “been around” for a longer and steadier period of time, tend to be men. Constructing women as “not good enough” without openly stating so allows participants to present themselves and HEA in a positive light, as egalitarian and meritocratic. The vertical gender imbalance is legitimised as merit-based, “the way things should be”.

This account is so common-sense and irrefutable that it works ideologically to close down any opportunity for action. Initiatives to redress the gender imbalance are reframed, within this patterned account, as undermining meritocracy:

Jack: I think.. in certain.. industries as I said there's always going to be.. an imbalance but as long as that imbalance is.. something that's not enforced because of somebody's view rather than somebody actually just happens to be.. -- one gender actually prefers to do the job.. there's always gonna be some statistical... some people who prefer [*inaudible*]... and then... as long as there isn't any enforced thing of making sure that it is always like grade 5 [*inaudible*].. cos that can be as wrong as..

Rob: Yeah.. you gotta get the best people.. for the job
[...]

James: I think.. like everyone I'd rather see the best person.. get the job [...] of all the possible things.. that have been discussed elsewhere you know the pros and cons of.. female shortlists [...] but like you say.. if the university's attitude is... they're not necessarily the best people then... it's kind of [*inaudible*] to find the.. maybe the best women to do.. these jobs.. which might be the right thing to do I don't know

(FG1)

Jack foregrounds the idea that the current gender imbalance is likely to be the natural outcome of gendered occupational preferences (also cf. Gill et al., 2017). This involves backgrounding the idea that the imbalance may be ‘enforced because of someone’s view’, i.e. the result of discrimination. As discrimination is repudiated, initiatives to change the imbalance are simultaneously constructed as going against people’s occupational choices and disrupt the way things are and should be: they are constructed as ‘enforced’ and ‘wrong’ as discrimination itself.

James’s discussion of all-female shortlists as a way to change the imbalance suggests that women may need this type of “extra help” not in order to counteract potential gender discrimination, but because they are simply not ‘the best people’. The opposition he establishes between the ‘best people’ and the ‘best women’ presupposes that, as the allegedly merit-based vertical imbalance suggests, the ‘best

people' tend to be men: appointing the best woman would mean ending up with a less deserving candidate. This vicious rhetorical circle further legitimises the status quo.

In egalitarian, meritocratic HEA, acting to change the imbalance involves *making gender relevant* where it allegedly is not, by promoting less competent women 'just because they're female':

Gabby: Is this distribution something that you'd like to see changed or not necessarily [...]

Peter: No I think.. it boils down to that.. that the people that are in the post can actually do the job that they're there to do... you don't want somebody promoted into a position just because.. they're female or because they're male or because they're white or because they're black or they're... you know purple with pink spots.. just because they fit.. that particular.. demographic in order to tick a box to say.. well we've got somebody that's purple with pink spots in that type of position... so I think it is about having the right person in the right job... at the right time

Jodie: I'd like to see it changed just coz [...] I don't think that's healthy [...] having said that you wouldn't want it to be equal at the expense of.. having.. people who don't know what they're doing [...]

Natalie: As a woman.. I wouldn't ever wanna feel that I'm... making up a number? I'd rather be there knowing.. I can do this [*bangs hand on table*] and I've got this off my own.. [*warrant?*] you know.. with my own skills.. and I wouldn't ever want to be there.. you know.. to even it out ... I want to earn it and be able to... -- because otherwise it's still isn't e-e-e-equal-equal is it? coz you'd still be viewed.. as inferior.. you can be on this grade. but... if you're not there out of.. your... personal skills... then you'll still be viewed as inferior

(FG3)

Gender and race discrimination are openly disavowed by Peter. He simultaneously constructs any initiative to change the imbalance as going *against* meritocracy, by promoting someone *just because* they're female and/or black or 'purple with pink spots'. Peter condemns acting on the gender imbalance as potentially detrimental, and also ridicules it as 'box ticking', as political correctness gone mad. Although Jodie would like to see a better gender balance, she would not want the university to achieve that at the expense of competence, again implying that the current imbalance is merit-based.

Natalie's turn shows how this ideological use of the meritocracy discourse can also characterise women's discussions of their own career progression (also cf. Gill et al., 2017). Far from wanting to be promoted to 'even it out' and 'make up a number', Natalie wants to 'earn' it, i.e. deserve it. Acting to change the imbalance therefore becomes morally unfair to both men and women, as it would involve promoting less deserving candidates *just because* they are women and/or BAME. As Natalie puts it, this would confirm 'women's inferiority', as it would result in the appointment of the best woman, not the best candidate. Interestingly, the "race issue" is raised only to

be dropped immediately – black people are replaced by ‘purple with pink spots’ individuals and then completely omitted when talking about ‘inferiority’. The meritocracy discourse is thus a flexible resource, drawn upon ideologically to racist and sexist effects or implications at a time (and place, like UK HE) where being openly sexist and racist is no longer accepted.

The moral panic around positive action to redress the gender imbalance can be traced in how the recent appointment of a female senior manager is described to M7 by another staff member:

Someone said to me “oh yeah it's good.. (HH) and it wasn't coz she was female that she was appointed I mean she was appointed on her own merit!” (M7)

This quote suggests that doubts about someone’s merit are raised and gender is made relevant only when the gender-imbalanced status quo is somehow threatened, for example by the appointment of a female senior manager. It is unlikely that the appointment of a (white) male senior manager would have received a similar comment.

If the gender-imbalanced status quo is legitimised as merit-based, initiatives to address the gender imbalance are reframed as “positive discrimination”:

I think we live in a society now where it's less of an issue? about gender and what role you do and what job you perform? ... (2) and as much as I would like to see a balance.. I would hate for someone to get a job just because they -- just based on their gender... so I don't believe in positive.. erm discrimination [...] I think someone should get a job.. for doing their job.. so whilst.. I would like to see more of a balance I don't see that as necessarily a problem [...] If [*women*] are good at their job then I can't see why.. any reason why they shouldn't.. progress? [...] I think [*universities*] are trying to put on.. a.. facade that they are more... (1) of an equal.. opportunities employer... but I don't necessarily think.. that a woman should get.. a higher grade job just because she's a woman (L7)

L7 is not the only participant who openly states that he would like to see the imbalance change, but whose way of drawing on a meritocracy discourse works ideologically to sustain the status quo (constructed as ‘not necessarily a problem’). As gender inequality/discrimination is repudiated, L7 ‘can’t see why.. any reason why’ women should not progress, apart from lack of merit. Participants regularly argue against initiatives aimed at redressing the gender imbalance by constructing them as making gender relevant in a sector, HEA, where “gender does not matter”.

10.4. Gender is irrelevant in (gender-imbalanced) HEA

When asked directly, participants regularly deny that gender might be an advantage, barrier, or simply somehow relevant in HEA. In the excerpts below, for instance,

although Nikki acknowledges that some examples were previously given, most FG7 participants reportedly cannot think of occasions where gender seemed an advantage or disadvantage at work. Similarly, despite my hint, L1 answers she does not know, cannot think of anything, and ends up denying that gender alone makes any difference in female-dominated HEA:

- Gabby: Can you think of an example or occasion at work where gender seemed to be relevant.. either as an advantage or a disadvantage.. I've already shared mine so.. [I won't do it again @]
- Nikki: [you've already shared] yours..
- Gabby: [softly] mmm no.. not in this job
- Efie: No
- Priya: No
- Monica:
- Gabby: Can you think of any.. examples? and you might have cited some already.. where being a woman has been an advantage or barrier in university administration work? ⁵³
- L1: [...] I don't know really [...] I don't think it really makes a difference if you're a woman because there are so many that.. in terms of applying for a job.. you probably end up competing with a woman rather than a man.. so I don't think that gender is gonna make a difference... I don't know if having.. children... does make a difference.. but... I don't have children so.. I couldn't tell you
- Gabby: Okay.. and can you think of any examples [...] where being a woman or a man could be an advantage or a barrier in higher education administration work...
- L1: ... (4) [...] I can't think of anything

M1 replies that, despite gendered assumptions, *in actual fact* gender is 'irrelevant' in HEA, because women and men are equally able to do the work:

I guess it's assumed.. that women have better.. softer skills.. caring skills [...] so it might be viewed that.. women are able to provide.. that kind of.. support to students maybe in a.. in a nice way... (1) but in actual fact the work that we do?... especially at grade 2 or 3 could be done by a man or a female.. gender is irrelevant..[...] so.. I wouldn't see that there was a... an advantage or a barrier in either... way (M1)

M1 simultaneously acknowledges the existence of gendered assumptions and denies that gender may play a role in HEA. This is one of several examples across the data sets of what Kelan (2009b) defines as 'gender fatigue': a palpable 'sense of ennui',

⁵³ This question was rephrased in each version of the questioning routes precisely because I was puzzled by participants' denial of the relevance of gender, having seen data on the gender imbalance and previously talked about gender differences/episodes of gender-differential treatment. The decision was made to replace gender with woman/man as participants seemed to make sense of gender as meaning women only; disadvantage was replaced by barrier as the latter was considered less "strong" and would perhaps encourage participants to talk more openly. In hindsight, the issue was clearly not the wording of the question.

caused by 'the simultaneous acknowledgment that gender might play a role combined with the insistence that it does not' (Gill et al, 2017: 227).

As scholars have noted (e.g. Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Kelan, 2009a&b; Gill et al., 2017), in apparently egalitarian workplaces where the dominant rhetoric constructs gender as irrelevant, naming and articulating gender inequality and/or discrimination becomes difficult, if not impossible. This study's participants regularly state they cannot think of any examples, do not know/understand, and 'would be intrigued' or 'interested to know' the reasons behind the imbalance:

It would be nice to see a lot more women in these higher grade positions? and.. actually I don't understand why they can't.. be in these higher grade positions... but it would also be really <@good@> to see.. some men! in these lower-grade positions because... to be honest with you.. being a higher education administrator it makes no difference whether you are.. male or female.. so.. I mean there shouldn't be.. (1) any distinguishable.. differences between the number of people in these roles.. and I yeah.. I'm intrigued to know why.. there is (L4)

In terms of administration it really shouldn't be because it's not physical work?.. [...] you know brains work the same... a:nd.. in most university administration you have to be.. (H) strategic or organised.. or both (M2)

Both M2 and L4 express perplexity when it comes to accounting for the gender imbalance, which 'really shouldn't' be there in HEA, because men and women are equally able to do the work. These participants seem to suggest that there is "something" inexplicable behind the gender imbalance, which they cannot name or articulate: as Gill puts it, (gender) inequality has become 'unspeakable' (2014). The discriminatory nature of previously-told episodes of gender-differential treatment also becomes unintelligible as these are reconstructed as isolated incidents (a tendency also noted by Gill et al, 2017). For example, M2 does not make sense of the "girly biscuits" episode she previously narrated (cf. 9.3) as a manifestation of gender inequality/discrimination, and denies that being a woman has ever been a disadvantage for her because she does not have children (cf. 10.2).

Gender-based (dis)advantage is something that participants regularly state they have never personally experienced:

Gabby: Can you think of any.. examples where being a woman has been an advantage or a barrier.. in university administration work
M5: ... (4) no.. I don't think so... no I haven't actually experienced that at all? erm... (1) no I really.. I really can't actually [*smiles*]... (1) I think all the jobs that I've gone for and then got it's.. if it's been against men it.. it doesn't matter?.. I just.. get them [@]
Gabby: [@]
M5: <@You know sometimes I don't get them@>.. but.. you know.. I've

never felt like I can't apply for something or I can't get something just because.. I'm a woman..

Gabby: And can you think of any examples where being a woman or a man could be an advantage or a barrier in university administration work

M5: ... (HHH) erm... (HHx) mmm... (4) I suppose there's not a lot of people who would employ.. a man to be their.. secretary! which is really... I don't know why.. it's quite awkward <@I suppose@> [... for] somebody really high up.. – a man.. wouldn't want to tell another man what to do?

In M5's quote, personal success is used as evidence that being a woman has never been and could not be a disadvantage in HEA. Naming the 'show pieces' (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998) or the "token woman" at the top as the living proof that gender inequality does not exist is a noticeable tendency across the data sets. This focus on individual success as evidence that gender equality has been achieved is an element of a 'postfeminist sensibility' (Gill et al. 2017) traceable in many accounts of successful businesswomen's ascent to leadership (e.g. Sandberg, 2013, cf. Adamson, 2017, amongst others, for a critique). This often involves a repudiation of feminism as not (or no longer) necessary. M12 for example strongly distances herself from her own definition of feminism: 'I am not a feminist.. I am not one of these.. poor us poor women... if you want something go and get it' (cf. 9.2.2).

Interestingly, later on in the excerpt above M5 assumes that 'somebody really high up' will be a man, thus accounting for the under-representation of men in secretarial roles as due to the fact that 'a man.. wouldn't want to tell a man what to do'. This not only contradicts M5's previous denial of the relevance of gender. It also shows that it is more acceptable to talk about "male disadvantage" (also cf. 8.3; 11.1.1) than acknowledging that the current vertical gender imbalance, whereby most people 'higher up' *are* male, might well be evidence of gender inequality.

Contradictions are very frequent in accounts which construct gender as irrelevant. This suggests that these accounts may be doing some ideological discursive work – namely, reasserting the construction of HE(A) as egalitarian in spite of the gender imbalance:

Gabby: Do you feel that gender could be an advantage disadvantage or.. neither.. in university administration

James: I think.. genuinely [...] it's pretty neutral.. I mean I'm not sure.. why.. that might seem a bit contradictory given what's happening.. up here but I think.. I don't know I genuinely think if you go for the job.. if you put yourself forward for them.. of course various things would be taken into account but I.. would assume at our university I don't think gender would be really... one of them

Jack: I'd agree yeah I don't think so.. I think it's wider than.. that I think it's.. individuals' perceptions of what they should be doing.. I think that's a stronger... factor than actually what people [*inaudible*].. I would hope anyway @

Calvin: I feel like our.. Schools are trying to strike the right.. gender balance because [...] when I came in.. I was the only man that came in.. and then there was an influx of girls.. then there was an influx of men.. [...] it's been generally quite.. balanced

(FG1)

James initially orients to his own denial of the relevance of gender in gender-imbalanced HEA as 'a bit contradictory'. However, this is a concession he makes only to reaffirm his point, i.e. that those who apply for progression only get evaluated on the basis of merit (cf. 10.3). Jack mentions individuals' perceptions of gender-appropriate work as influencing applications, denying that gender (read: gender discrimination/inequality) might be a factor in the imbalance. Calvin's turn might seem contradictory at first, as he goes as far as to suggest that CSU is consciously recruiting gender-balanced teams, i.e. that gender *is* relevant. On the other hand, this variability supports and eventually strengthens his colleagues' previous disavowal of gender discrimination/inequality, by foregrounding CSU's egalitarian ethos.

In the following FG3 extract, Peter strongly denies that gender could be an advantage or disadvantage:

Gabby: Do you think that gender could be an advantage or disadvantage or neither in administration?
(3)

Peter: Neither... I don't think that gender has... (2) you know being a male I don't think I have an advantage over.. my female counterparts or that they have a.. an advantage or disadvantage over me I don't think
[...]

Camille: I... I would disagree with you in the sense that [...] I... I would have the stereotype that being a woman would be an advantage in the sense that it's more.. women-dominated [*on lower-grades...*] so I wonder if as this stereotype exist.. at a certain level they don't.. especially engineering copy this stereotype and would erm.. take.. more=

Peter: [=I think that..]

Camille: [more women] on board rather than..

Peter: I think maybe.. when you're getting to these types of positions [G6-7] in an environment such as engineering I think you might then find maybe gender then does start to play a role.. depending on who.. is sitting at the top of the tree at the time if they are very old-school you know very traditional then they are going to promote a male over a female unfortunately... erm... so=
=so.. so I think gender is still.. even if we want it to be equal I don't think it exists yet and there's still a lot of progress to=

Camille: =yeah but I'm saying.. personally.. where I'm working currently and who I'm working with I don't think that I have an advantage or a disadvantage over any of my counterparts.. because I'm male.. and they're female or you know or they have an advantage over me because they're female.. [...] if you then start talking about experience.. then I would say... then yes but just if you're taking just gender.. no I don't think there's any difference but that's... personal (FG3)

Camille openly disagrees with Peter. She states that women might experience 'positive discrimination' in G2/G3 admin roles because of 'this stereotype' working against men (cf. 8.3) – especially in male-dominated schools such as engineering. Camille's mention of engineering prompts Peter to make a concession. Peter's concession takes the form of a previously-mentioned patterned account: he relocates potential gender discrimination elsewhere, i.e. in male-dominated engineering ("not here", cf. 10.1.2), but only in G6/G7 roles, and 'unfortunately'. When Camille attempts to name gender inequality and acknowledge its existence, Peter interrupts her to reassert that gender is irrelevant, that he has never personally encountered or seen any gender-based (dis)advantage, and that what matters is "experience", i.e. merit (cf. 10.3).

As previously noted, participants regularly deny the existence of gender inequality by stating that they 'have never seen it' (e.g. M8), or that the issue is not gender, but something else. For example, although she states that 'it's always women.. younger women.. that are at the bottom of the chain.. in university administration', M12 argues this is due to age, rather than sex (also cf. Scharff, 2011; Gill et al., 2017). M13 goes as far as to foreground and name racism and class inequality in her repudiation of sexism:

Women.. (Hx) advantage... (1) I'm sure there are loads.. and I can't think of any... (3) and no.. as a disadvantage.. no [...] as a younger woman.. I'm disadvantaged? because I don't think they take me as seriously.. (HH) that's not the fact that I'm a woman that's more my age (M12)

I have had no bad experiences but... (1) -- and I have not.. really seen.. any bad experiences? I've seen other types of <@bad experiences@>.. but nothing to do with gender.. I've not seen any kind of.. discrimination [...] I have experienced... (1.5) an individual... who... (2) was a woman... and [...] of a.. particular background.. and.. had a perception... (1.5) that... they had to fight harder.. to get where they got to.. because they were a woman.. and because of their.. background [...] now.. I might not have.. that perception.. because... (1) I'm a female and I'm white.. and I think... (2) it's more.. than just male and female I think there is a class.. and I think there's.. there is racism... (1) but I don't think it is to do with male and female I think it's deeper than that... I don't necessarily agree with this individual.. because I've never really seen that... here... I've just.. been told.. from that individual that it was her... experience and her thoughts and her feelings... (1) erm.. but I've not actually seen that being the case... [...] but I have experienced people... (HHH).. feel discriminated on for other reasons.. not.. to do with their sex.. to do with.. the colour of their skin.. to do with.. other reasons.. some of it valid some of it not valid (M13)

M13 makes great discursive effort to deny that gender discrimination exists, by stating she has never seen or experienced it. She also frames racism and class inequality as problems which exist, as opposed to gender discrimination. However, M13 eventually ends up equally repudiating the existence of structural, systemic racism

and intersectional discrimination. In particular, her colleagues' experiences of (intersectional) discrimination are presented, and dismissed, as 'a perception' ('her.. experience and her thoughts and her feelings'; 'a chip on her shoulder'), as doubtful – 'some of it valid, some of it not valid' – as M13 repeats that she has 'never really seen that' several times. Systemic racism is also reconstructed and repudiated as a set of isolated episodes, attributed to some 'individuals... (1) being absolute idiots [...] you get a bad egg sometimes.. and occasionally they slip through the net' (M13). This net is, arguably, HEA's construction as an egalitarian and meritocratic sector, at the forefront of equality and diversity policy and practice, where discrimination does not and cannot possibly exist.

10.5. Conclusion

This chapter critiqued participants' patterned accounts which eventually work to deny that the gender imbalance might be the result of gender discrimination/inequality in HEA. Participants re-construct the gender imbalance as a residual effect of past gender roles, state it is not reflective of their experience, relocate it elsewhere, naturalise and legitimise it as "the way things are" and "should be". In doing so, they eventually reassert HEA's construction as a family/female-friendly, egalitarian and meritocratic sector, where gender is irrelevant in spite of the gender imbalance. These patterned accounts bear strikingly similarities with, and were interpreted as, elements of a postfeminist sensibility intimately linked with neoliberalism (Gill et al, 2017). Gill and colleagues define this postfeminist sensibility as a

historically and culturally specific and patterned [...] constellation of ideas about individualism, choice, entrepreneurialism [...] which entail... the retreat from structural accounts of inequality, and the repudiation of sexism (2017: 227; 230).

It was argued that elements of this postfeminist sensibility provide participants with ways to navigate the (apparently) paradoxical 'degree of segregation that remains in the face of the sector's gender equity initiatives' (Strachan et al, 2013: 217). By co-producing these patterned accounts, participants end up reinforcing HEA's ideological construction as a female/family-friendly, egalitarian, meritocratic work environment, ultimately disavowing gender inequality and discrimination. As the gender imbalance is re-constructed as 'not necessarily a problem or a bad thing' (M11) and definitely not the result of gender inequality or discrimination, the rationale for action and change is substantially diminished. Initiatives to redress the gender-imbalanced status quo in allegedly gender-egalitarian HEA are re-constructed as

making gender relevant where it is not, e.g. as promoting women *just because* they are women.

HEA's construction as a female/family-friendly, meritocratic and egalitarian sector was thus discussed as an intricate discursive network which provides participants with opportunities to literally "talk themselves out" of the need to act for change. Far from being at odds with the gender imbalance, this rhetoric of equality and meritocracy was thus critiqued as part of what has 'allowed [universities] to continue in such a way' (Castleman & Allen, 1995: 69). Support to this claim is provided by the fact that, when asked whether they would like to see the gender imbalance change, several participants state that they are not that bothered, or simply answer about something else (e.g. progression).

Promoting discursive change – this study's ultimate objective – does not only entail identifying (and critiquing) discursive barriers, but also potentially emancipatory accounts, i.e. accounts which contest the gender-imbalance status quo (as defined in 4.1.2, pp.62-4). The next chapter looks at patterns – however thin – in participants' ways to argue for action and change to the gender imbalance, offering a critique of their ideological effects and flagging up potentially emancipatory alternatives.

Chapter 11. Arguing and Acting for Change

As previously noted, when asked whether they would like to see the gender imbalance change, some participants explicitly state that they are not particularly 'bothered' or 'fussed' (e.g. Mel, FG9; M12). That this is a "dispreferred" or unexpected response in egalitarian HE(A) is signalled by participants' tendency to hesitate, and account for their response by providing justifications, e.g. by drawing on a discourse of meritocracy (cf. 10.3):

Gabby: Is this gender distribution something that you'd like to see changed..
M5: ... (1) e:rm... (2) I don't know actually! @... (2) I think it would be really nice to see... (1) it be a bit more equally?... in grade 6 and 7? Although.. personally I don't think it's a problem?... I know a lot of @ -- I probably.. shouldn't really be saying this but.. I know a lot of people see it as a problem but I just think it's the best candidate for the job.. if it's a man or a woman.. I don't really see it as a problem

M5 states that she 'shouldn't really be saying this': her response is not consistent with HE's dominant rhetoric of equality.

Conversely, when participants provide the socially "preferred"/expected response, they do so promptly, often not qualifying their answer:

Gabby: Is this gender distribution something that you'd like to see changed? or.. not necessarily.. as long as=
Joan: =50-50! @
Andrea: Mm mm
Gabby: All the way [from the bottom to the top?]
Joan: [all the way yeah]
Andrea: [mm mm]

(FG4)

Gabby: Is this gender distribution something that you'd like to see changed? or.. not particularly
Efie: Definitely changed=
Nikki: yeah
Priya: yeah
Nikki: I would definitely yeah

(FG7)

Sometimes, however, participants do qualify their answers: Section 11.1 looks at the ways in which they argue for change and their effects. Section 11.2 explores how participants talk about initiatives to change the imbalance, focusing on areas for action.

11.1. Arguing for change

In this chapter (and throughout this thesis) the term ideological is used following Wetherell and Potter's formulation, i.e. as an *effect* of language use which ends up 'establishing, sustaining and reinforcing oppressive power relations' (Wetherell & Potter, 1992: 70; cf. 4.1.2, pp.62-4). It is, in other words, deployed to critique the effects of accounts/discourses which end up legitimising/supporting the gender-imbalanced/unequal status quo in HEA. As previously pointed out (cf. 4.1.2), because ideology is theorised as a 'discursive practice' (Ibid: 61), the 'unit of analysis' and critique is discursive patterns, not the 'individual actor' (Wetherell et al., 1987: 70): the term ideological does not therefore imply intentionality on the part of the speaker(s).

The term emancipatory is used here (and throughout this thesis) to refer to an effect of a given discourse/account which has the potential to contest the gender-imbalanced/unequal status quo, and thus open up opportunities for action and change. Ideological and emancipatory are used to refer to opposite *effects* of language use (legitimising/supporting vs. contesting/subverting). As previously noted, this situated use is in line with this study's critical realist perspective: a politicised, 'non-relativist variety' of social constructionism (Willig, 1999: 39), selected to be able to articulate political aims of social transformation (cf. 4.1.1; 4.1.2).

Patterns in participants' ways to argue for change are few and quite thin; they are, nevertheless, meaningful in that they can discursively open up opportunities for action. Not all these ways to argue for change are, however, potentially emancipatory: the next sub-sections critique some of their potentially ideological effects.

11.1.1. The "healthy" vs. "unhealthy" argument

Participants describe the gender imbalance as "unhealthy" and, conversely, argue for a better gender balance as "healthier", "nice" and/or "good":

Jodie: I'd like to see it changed just coz I think that's very... just on a... (3) large scale.. and within the university.. I don't think that's healthy... (1) one gender predominantly... you know at the lower end.. of the scale... and then another gender at the top.. I don't think that's... (1) healthy.. having said that you wouldn't want it to be equal at the expense of.. having.. people who don't know what they're doing (FG3)

Bev: I think it'd be healthier in a way I think you have to have.. -- skills-wise it makes no difference at all but I think just in terms of.. balance of.. just... variety you know what I mean [...] I quite enjoy.. male company I think.. they've different humours and that sort of thing.. [...] I think you can... add other balances.. it's good but I don't think

it.. detracts if it's not there.. you know I think sometimes it might enhance but it's not... I don't think it's a huge issue really

(FG5)

Both Jodie and Bev initially argue for change, but eventually end up talking themselves out of it. Jodie would not like to see a healthier balance at the expense of competence (cf. 10.3). Her construction of a better gender balance as 'healthier' is thus made as a concession, only to reinforce the "merit-based" status quo. Bev initially contests the gender differences discourse only to then draw upon it to construct a better balance as sometimes 'enhancing' the work environment, providing 'male company' and thus 'different humours'. Gender balance (and, generally speaking, diversity, which L3 describes as making things at work 'more interesting') is constructed as something "nice" to have, as an "extra" which is not "necessary". Simultaneously, the imbalance is reconstructed as not 'a huge issue', and the rationale for change is diminished.

Interestingly, M7 is one of the very few managers⁵⁴ who make a "business case", arguing that better gender balance improves the work environment, decision-making and productivity:

I don't think it's good.. to not have a gender -- I mean even if it was skewed the other way... -- having a better gender balance leads to better.. decision-making and a better environment.. It's a bit weird in this day and age.. that we're either male-dominated or female-dominated in particular areas.. cos it does impact.. on the individual and it impacts on the productivity and the nature of what we do as an organisation.. or any organisation so yeah I would.. like to see it change (M7)

Making a "business case for diversity" has become an increasingly common way to gain senior management support in the neoliberal university, including the financial investment needed to put actions and initiatives in place to effect change. ECU recently produced a report which reframes the "business case" from being exclusively based on a 'cost/benefit analysis' to being informed by vice-chancellors and principals' 'personal values and motivations' (ECU, 2014c). This points to the need and importance of conceiving such business case not exclusively in terms of organisational benefits (how it 'impacts on productivity'), but also and mostly as a matter of equality and social justice – if change is to happen at a structural level.

Constructing gender balance as "healthier" can also work to ideological effects, and is sometimes supported by damaging gendered discourses. For

⁵⁴ M7 is a senior manager, and due to her position (both within CSU and as a female senior manager in a male-dominated environment) is able to produce specific accounts, such as the "business case for diversity". For further discussion of the influence of positionality on the production of accounts, cf. 12.2.1.

example, a tendency can be identified among participants to argue for change by drawing on a “poor men” discourse⁵⁵. This constructs men as the disadvantaged / discriminated-against sex in “female-dominated” HEA (also cf. 8.3):

I know grade 6s that are women in the university and you can get to a grade 6 and you can even potentially get to a grade 7 I would imagine.. without any difficulty so... from my perspective this [*i.e. the imbalance*] isn't reflective of what I see.. but if this is what it is then yeah.. it does need to change.. but then [...] what about men... it needs to change for men more than it does for women I think.. because they're not getting the jobs to start off with! [...] I think I can see more reasons why maybe women are not getting a higher grade.. I can't see why men are not getting a lower grade.. I think that's probably the issue more.. it's not about women it's about men (M13)

I think it's quite unfair in a way because if you look at it in a bloke's -- we sometimes feel sorry that we don't have that many men in the office!... because there's women everywhere so... if a bloke walks in he'll say.. this is.. you know.. biased.. on males (M8)

This pattern was also identified by Gill and colleagues (2017) as typical of a postfeminist sensibility at work. In this study's data sets, men are said to be neglected, excluded or disadvantaged by current initiatives to address the gender imbalance, e.g. women-only leadership programmes (also cf. 11.2):

I've got colleagues who are... grade 4.. males.. quite young.. you know sort of late 20s early 30s.. and all they can see at the moment is a load of management programmes for women! So they're saying to me “so what about us?” and I'm.. “well you're quite right” (M7)

Potentially they're recruiting.. -- women are recruited into [*G2 and G3*] roles.. over men perhaps.. because they're thinking of levelling.. the balance out.. levelling the playing field with it.. which might not necessarily be for.. -- well it wouldn't be for the right reasons if that was the reason but.. [...] I think is a shame [...] the huge kind of disparity between.. the female and male (M11)

The overrepresentation of women in lower-level jobs is reframed by M11 as a conscious attempt at ‘levelling the playing field’ and the overall staff gender profile in HEA. ‘The huge kind of disparity’ is thus constructed as a shame for, or unfair to, men.

The “poor men” discourse is increasingly being drawn upon in UK HE at large: for example, the Times Higher Education recently published an article about the ‘anti-bloke bias’ (Grove, 2016) and there has been backlash against Athena SWAN (cf. Caffrey et al., 2016; Maudsley Debate, 2016, Ovseiko et al. 2017), constructed as

⁵⁵ The “poor men” discourse is not a strong pattern in the FG data set, where only a couple of instances of it can be traced. This might be due to the group nature of the data collection method, rather than it being specific to the discourse of managers versus non-managers (since two of the interviewees who draw on this discourse (L3, M11) are not line/senior managers).

encouraging women's promotion *just because* they are women (cf. 10.3). This tendency in the data sets was critiqued in the previous chapters, and should be equally critiqued when it is used to argue for change. It ideologically works to move the focus away from who, *generally speaking*, is disadvantaged by and who benefits from the gender-imbalanced status quo, and therefore closes down opportunities for progressive change.

Participants arguing for a "healthier" gender balance in lower-level admin roles regularly draw upon our societal and 'cultural overvaluation of men' (Williams, 1993b: 7), in two main ways. Firstly, as women are constructed as gossipy, 'catty' (e.g. FG5), and 'bitchy' (M8), the presence of more men would allegedly improve the environment: 'an office full of women <@can be horrendous@>' (M12), or, put euphemistically, 'an interesting work environment' (Calvin, FG1). The second way is linked to the gendered devaluation of university admin: an increased proportion of men in these jobs, participants argue, would re-value "women's work":

The culture just needs to.. slightly change I think.. that's why I think it would be good to have more male? typists secretaries and PAs or in certain positions the-the role itself is complicated you do need organisational skills it's not just -- [changes topic] (Majid, FG8)

More men doing lower-level university admin would allegedly change the "culture", i.e. the assumption that these roles are not complicated, '*just*' admin, in turn linked to the fact that they are mostly done by women.

In FG5, Yokow similarly argues that a better gender balance at CSU and in HEA would 'help a lot of people':

if [you're a woman and] you're working.. in the university [...] they obviously think you're not an academic straight away so... it's the assistant.. but of course if it was more equal... then you wouldn't have that type of reaction.. "oh you're just an.. administrator" (Yokow, FG5)

If HEA/CSU were more gender-balanced, administrators would not be '*just*' administrators, because admin would no longer be devalued "women's work". At the same time, female academics would also no longer be mistaken for the 'assistant' just because they are women. Admin would be revalued by being done by men; women would not need to do (or be recognised as) doing academic (i.e. men's) work in order to be valued.

11.1.2. The “more women in leadership” argument

A competing tendency is for participants is to construct the gender imbalance on lower grades and the horizontal imbalance as not really an issue, and argue for change only at the top. This pattern can not only be traced in female managers’ patterned ways to argue for improved balance (e.g. M6), but also in FG participants’:

Gabby: Is this.. gender distribution something you’d like to see changed or not particularly
Beck: Definitely.. definitely.. I feel it’s.. obviously very difficult for women to get to the highest level of university admin [...] I don’t think you can put that down to.. “oh it’s just because.. at the moment there aren’t enough women in senior positions that have that have got that level of.. expertise or experience” so.. I think it’s definitely a problem that needs to be addressed
Gabby: And what about.. lower grades
All: ... (6)
Beck: I don’t know how you would just kind of address that.. I’m not sure if it is a problem that there are... -- I’m not sure whether that affects the balance later on.. if it does.. then then yeah maybe that.. does need to be addressed [...] across the board

(FG6)

Beck articulates a clear rationale for change in senior roles, constructing the underrepresentation of women as ‘a problem that needs to be addressed’. She also seems to suggest that the imbalance cannot be solely attributed to women’s alleged lack of experience. However, she does not appear to make sense of women’s overrepresentation on lower grades as an issue *for women*, and/or as affecting their underrepresentation on higher grades: her argument in favour of the need for change ‘across the board’ ends up being less compelling.

The underrepresentation of women on higher grades vis-à-vis their overrepresentation on lower grades is frequently made sense of not an issue *per se*, but rather in that it signals (female) administrators’ lack of progression (cf. 9.2.3):

I think that there needs to be a balance all the way through... even grade 2 admin is.. important... there’s nothing wrong with learning from the ground up.. I think that gives you a good perspective when you get to the top (M1)

This prompts participants to propose career development-related actions (cf. 11.2.1) and often reframe the gender imbalance as a career progression issue (for both women and men) – rather than a gender (in)equality issue.

Another tendency is to argue for better balance in leadership, decision-making roles as this would provide more female roles models. In turn, this would improve the

“culture”, lead to the recruitment and promotion of more women, and eventually level the imbalance out:

- Gabby: Is this gender distribution something you'd like to see changed=
M2: =yeah definitely.. I mean for the reasons that I've said like you go to a meeting and.. it's predominantly men it's.. intimidating [...] Talking to some of the other people from other universities [...] one of them... went on maternity leave.. and while she was gone.. they changed the job... offered it out gave it to someone else... so instead of kicking up a fuss she used it to -- they wanted her back four days a week and she levered it to say that she'd only come back three days a week? because she'd done this.. either I complain about this or.. you let me come back three days a week.. but the fact that she had to... do that and barter... is... you know [...] -- if it was.. more equal across the board.. then it would be a lot easier [...] and I just think there's not enough role models? for the grades 2s and 3s? for the women? to say.. hey come on.. you can do this.. why don't you go for promotion? (H) because it can be really.. I think it can be quite intimidating to be on a lower grade and be a woman and go [*for promotion*...] so if it'd be more evenly split it would encourage them to go for more jobs
- M6: I think at this end definitely [...] because so many of the grade 7s.. have the hiring decisions.. for senior staff.. and it would be nice to see more women [...] cos a lot of the.. panels? are.. white males @ and.. they're just all white males whether they're interviewing a female or.. (H) -- so yeah I would like to see it at that end.. a bit more.. diverse

M2 contests HEA's dominant construction as a family/female-friendly employer: she reframes it as a workplace where meetings are 'intimidating' and new mothers have to 'barter' for flexible working by promising not to speak up about pregnancy discrimination. She argues that more women in senior roles would improve this "culture", making meetings and childcare-related flexible working arrangements 'a lot easier' by their mere presence. M6 also implies by virtue of their sex (and perhaps "minority" status) women would not discriminate against and/or are more likely to select other women (or minorities).

These arguments for balance in top roles place the onus for change on women (once a few more of them have reached senior management). The "role-model argument" is an individualised one, where female G2/G3 administrators' lack of progression is reframed as a result of lack of confidence (cf. M2's quote). As a way to argue for change which involves 'successful women [acting] as models for the less successful' (Wetherell et al, 1987: 67), this leaves several structural impediments unaddressed 'for women as a whole' (Ibid: 68). As Vanessa puts it, female role models would be 'nice to have [...] to think oh maybe one day you could get there' (FG9). This argument implies that a few women at the top would be the living proof

that gender inequality does not exist, and that women can get to the top if they just work hard and are confident enough.

Arguing for better gender balance in top roles in terms of its positive consequences on all levels of the HEA hierarchy *could* nevertheless have potentially emancipatory effects. It has the *potential* to consider women's overrepresentation in lower-level jobs as the other side of the coin which is gender inequality or, in other words, "the bigger picture" instead of "more successful" women only. All aspects of gender inequality should be taken into account: this is an argument made by a few participants, arguing for better gender balance "across the board" as a matter of equality and social justice.

11.1.3. The "equality and social justice" argument

Though rare, there are instances in the data sets where participants argue for gender balance "everywhere":

If there was a level playground... and everyone got the opportunity to try everything.. without being made to feel like oh you should be doing this.. kind of.. jobs or.. without that percep -- cos the perception is there [...] if boys and girls were given.. the opportunity to be anything? without having this stereotype I think that [*i.e. the gender imbalance*] would look different (Efie, FG7)

I think it should be equal.. everywhere! I don't buy into [inaudible] that you can do certain things better than men and viceversa.. and you can learn (Amala, FG2)

Both Amala and Efie contest a discourse of "natural" or essential sex/gender differences. They do not do so by stating that gender is irrelevant; rather, they suggest that gender *should* not matter, but it does, due to gender assumptions and the lack of equal opportunities.

Later in FG2, Amala argues that if people were recruited according to their ability to do the job, i.e. rather than (also) their gender, 'the whole gender thing would fall into place' (cf. 11.2.1). This turns the ideological use of the meritocracy discourse on its head: it implies that the gender imbalance is *not* the result of merit-based recruitment and promotion decisions. M4's quote is another example of this:

I always think that you should have the best person for the job!... (1) and I do believe that women are as good as men.. and I don't think they're that different either.. I mean there's little.. things but I think.. in the nature of university administration management.. there is nothing that makes it.. you know female or male.. characteristics more or less... suitable a job so... I don't see why it should.. -- why this situation is necessary... it should be more equal (M4)

M4 draws on the meritocracy discourse to argue for better gender balance, i.e. in a way which challenges, rather than legitimising, the gender-imbalanced status quo and is therefore potentially emancipatory. This she achieves by contesting the dominant gender differences discourse which constructs men and women as suitable for different jobs: as women and men are equally good, she argues, having the 'best person for the job' would result in a much more gender-balanced HEA. In doing so, she simultaneously undermines the argument that the gender imbalance is the "necessary" side effect of meritocracy, and HEA's construction as an already egalitarian, meritocratic sector (cf. Chapter 10).

Though rare, there are other instances of participants arguing for better gender balance by turning ideological arguments on their head:

Yeah we should have more women.. up there because.. [...] you can't explain all away with.. motherhood and.. [...] there's gotta be some sort of... bias whether it's conscious or unconscious... in the hiring process in the recruiting process.. in the way jobs are structured (L6)

No of course I would because I'm a.. woman? <@a:nd@>... it is the 21st century? @ and I think the public sector should be leading.. [...] a:nd... (2) because it takes a lot of time for people to do it.. voluntarily.. [...] that's gonna take forever so if the public sector could take a lead.. like it's done with other things.. then it creates a standard.. and then.. lots of people want to work in the public sector because of that standard then that pushes the private sector to.. up their game (L1)

L6 challenges the widespread tendency to explain the imbalance away as a result of motherhood and childcare (cf. 10.2), by pointing to other determinants of gender inequality/discrimination, e.g. gender bias in recruitment and 'in the way jobs are structured'. L1 counteracts the tendency to construct the current gender imbalance as 'changing', 'bound to change' or 'good' compared to the past (cf. 10.1). She does so by constructing it as unacceptable in the 21st century and explicitly holding HEA as a public-sector employer accountable for taking the lead instead of "just waiting" for society to change. Interestingly, both these quotes comes from leavers, which suggests that their relatively less institutionally-constrained position (when compared to CSU managers and FG participants) may play a role in the production of counter-discourses (cf. 12.2.1 for further discussion of positionality).

11.2. Acting for change

While FG participants were asked for their suggestions to change the imbalance, interviewees were also prompted to comment on a list of initiatives already being implemented in the sector, and that also included FG participants' suggestions (cf.

Table 2, p.75). This section organises and explores participants' talk around areas for action: acting at key career transition points (KCTPs, cf. 11.2.1; a. recruitment; b. career development & progression); "culture change" (cf. 11.2.2; a. paternity leave; b. flexible working; c. revaluing and de-gendering university admin); and taking a holistic, systematic, embedded approach to change (cf. 11.2.3)⁵⁶. The focus is, as throughout this thesis, on the effects of participants' patterned accounts in terms of whether they close down or open up opportunities for action and change.

11.2.1. Acting at KCTPs: recruitment and progression

a. Recruitment

Ensuring fairness in recruitment is cited as a way to change the gender imbalance, on lower as well as higher grades:

M2: I've hired a lot of guys I've.. I've hired 50-50 male and female... but I don't know.. whether other people do that.. and I don't get 50-50 applications... (1) just because it's a guy I don't go "you're not gonna make a good PA"... so I guess we should be making sure that people are recruiting fairly... and people... just because they've got a team of women... aren't recruiting.. people in their image... aren't going "okay well we've got five women so a guy wouldn't get on" so they're not gonna recruit them.. it's making sure that the recruitment process is fair

Amala: The ability to recruit accordingly... has to be fairly strong in order for the right people to be in the right place regardless of their gender and that's what I feel... doesn't necessarily get done... adequately.. and then I think... the whole... gender thing falls into place.. I think then they're male can they do the job.. and it's not because they're a man they can do it.. it's because they have the ability.. and the female.. equally can do it

Anna: Yeah that's it... it's recruitment.. it's the advertising as well.. it's attracting more men to... a grade 2 grade 3 level in the first place
(FG2)

These participants argue that the 'ability to recruit accordingly', 'adequately' and 'fairly', i.e. on the basis of candidates' ability and merit 'regardless of their gender', would be re-balance the HEA and CSU workforce. This simultaneously contests the construction of the current gender imbalance as a "side-effect" of meritocracy (also cf. 11.1.3), therefore opening up opportunities for change.

In FG2, Anna also mentions the need to advertise G4/G5 roles so that they *attract* more men. Although this does not constitute a particularly strong pattern in the

⁵⁶ The influence of ECU's Athena SWAN (ECU, 2017) terminology is evident and acknowledged here – although the term embedded is also used by M7, and several participants argue for change in the "culture" (e.g. FG8), albeit in sometimes elusive ways.

data sets, it is a point that M7 also makes when she talks about how 'we pitch' lower-level university admin roles:

At this end of things I think we could do a lot better.. in how we're pitching... roles? How we pitch the roles of course administrator.. it's not someone who's a secretary.. it's someone who's actually providing a really important service for cohorts of students and their experience.. they're contributing to the student experience.. they're making a real difference to.. students' time at university.. and the way in which their course is managed.. so I mean.. they make a crucial impact in my view on what happens.. and I don't think they're recognised... for what they do.. I think therefore... we should give some better thought to how we articulate job descriptions and pitch opportunities within universities (M7)

Changing the way 'we pitch roles' is a particularly interesting suggestion considering the linguistic/discursive focus of the present study. It is, potentially, a way to contest the discursive devaluation of university admin work by institutionally re-constructing it as 'really important', 'making a real difference' and having 'a crucial impact'.

The assumption or prediction that this re-pitching would attract more men is, however, what makes this a not straightforwardly emancipatory way to argue for change in the gender imbalance. It implies that attracting more men would be the result of revaluing e.g. the course administrator role by re-pitching it as 'not someone who's a secretary' – i.e. of degendering the role *in order to* revalue it and further degender it. Put differently, the degendering of university admin would be both the means and end result of its re-valuation or re-pitching. As this simply reconstructs 'course administrators' as 'not secretaries', it does not challenge the 'secretaries are women' gendered discourse and the gendered devaluation of university admin as secretarial work. The thesis conclusion argues for the need to find a way to contest the gendered devaluation of university admin work, i.e. the interplay between its devaluation and feminisation; a way which does not revalue it simply by disassociating it from devalued women's work, thus relying and reasserting our 'cultural [...] devaluation of women' (Williams, 1993b: 7) and "women's work" (cf. Chapter 12; also cf. 11.2.2c).

Returning to the issue of fairness in recruitment, blind applications, a suggestion made by Nikki in FG7, are almost uniformly supported by managers and leavers:

I think an application should be as.. anonymous [...] as possible.. because you can't help yourself (M4)

I think somebody should definitely pilot that and see.. cos that would be just.. amazing.. I think you'd see changes.. and I don't think you'd necessarily.. point at someone saying well you did that deliberately.. I think unconscious bias plays a huge impact (L6)

I quite like the.. the blind application.. because.. I mean you're not intentionally biased? but I think actually.. when people read an application.. there are probably certain things that.. -- once you see that they're actually.. male or female? it can kind of.. sway you in a way or another.. to a particular role I think?... but of course again.. whether it's a blind application or not.. when they come to interview... you know (L4)

These quotes exemplify how the concept of unconscious bias has gained currency in HE equality and diversity discourse. Being “unconscious”, it is bias that participants are willing to admit, talk about, and act upon, for example by implementing a blind application system. As the last part of L4’s quote suggests, however, blind applications can help only up to interview stage, where unconscious bias reportedly kicks in again:

I don't care what anyone says you make a judgment on someone as soon as you meet them.. we all do it that's.. human nature and life (M13)

(Unconscious) bias is part of ‘human nature’, and as ‘you can’t help yourself’ (cf. M4 above), the possibility for change is significantly diminished.

A recent trend in HE equality & diversity policy and practice has been the introduction of unconscious bias (UB) training, to further counteract our tendency to favour individuals from our in-group and conversely stereotype and discriminate against individuals from out-groups. UB training is talked about positively by leavers who have attended it at their institution; at the time of the data collection, UB training at CSU was being provided ‘just at the very senior level’ (M4). Managers consistently state that this should be rolled out to all recruiting members of staff, including middle-managers, or even to all members of staff (e.g. M1). The verdict is still out as to whether/how UB training is effective. Studies suggests its effectiveness relies on factors such content, delivery, and audience (Emerson, 2017), and on whether it ends up being a one-off tick-box exercise rather than part of an embedded approach (cf. 11.2.3).

Some participants argue that diversity on interview panels can mitigate unconscious bias:

Ensuring diversity of interview panel members.. would be very helpful.. it's something they always try and do.. in this School we try and represent... different grades and.. yeah different genders as well... (1) cos I think there must be some element of unconscious bias.. it's hard to.. prove but... (1) it's good to.. have a different perspective on it (M5)

Having diversity... having a.. mixture of people making those kind of decisions rather than.. a panel of three men... three white men interviewing <@another white man!@> (M1)

That having a “diverse” interview panel results in increased diversity in appointments is a debated point in the data sets (as well as in the sector at large). It implies a rather essentialist view that bias can only ever occur against members of an out-group. It also sometimes draws on a gender difference discourse, whereby women and men are constructed as valuing different aspects/attributes, making different decisions, or making decisions differently. Echoing research showing that, for instance, bias against women can come from women as well as men (e.g. Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), participants contest the requirement to have diverse panels ‘just for the sake of it’ (L7):

I don't believe if I see an [BAME] person I'm gonna get a job.. <@and I would be wrong to think that@> (M8)

If you've only got say white females interviewing people.. that might be sometimes just what it is? and.. for you to go and find someone who's of a different background to come in.. then you're already making.. an assumption.. that people <@are gonna make that assumption@> and I think that's the wrong way to go about it.. we don't need that (M13)

Although the need to recruit fairly and based on merit rather than gender (and/or other characteristics) is a point raised by participants to change the gender imbalance, there seems to be little agreement as to how to do so in practice. Participants collectively support and simultaneously contest current initiatives to act in this area, thus reaching a stalemate as to how to address this KCTP. A similar tendency can be noted in participants’ talk about career development and progression.

b. Career development and progression

The lack of career development and progression opportunities is an issue raised consistently across the FG data set. Managers also talk about “getting stuck on G5”. Chapter 9 pointed out how lack of progression is reframed as a “gender issue” when participants account for the vertical gender imbalance. Consequently, career development and progression is a regularly-mentioned area for action in order to change the imbalance. For example, M6 suggests investing in G5 managers already working at CSU:

It's how -- if they're going to put some faith into people who already.. work in the institution to take those roles rather than going outside for them? (M6)

Similarly, FG participants argue in favour of increased investment in administrators’ career development and progression: for example, they propose an improved appraisal system which is not a mere tick-box exercise used to add more to

someone's workload (e.g. FG3, FG4, FG7); a formalised mentoring system (e.g. FG3, FG8); a clearer career/promotion pathway, modelled on the system already in place for academic staff (e.g. FG3); a more transparent, consistent way to advertise vacancies internally and/or externally to enhance internal progression from G3 to G4 (e.g. FG9). Many FG participants are critical of a training provision exclusively aimed at their current roles, instead of being targeted to enable their development and progression (cf. Chapter 7):

Stacey: [...] Shouldn't there be sort of.. options to be able to do.. -- some courses that lead to more managerial positions..

Bev: Rather than an advanced what you already know

(FG5)

Generally, interviewees express support for development and progression-related initiatives (although some managers raise doubts about investing in staff who may then progress elsewhere, cf. 7.2):

I think we need to be looking.. at it and say.. "right okay how can we develop.. everyone"... because if you're making sure that everybody here has the opportunity to develop in the way that they want to develop.. then you're gonna get a more balanced workforce.. just.. I think.. naturally [...] I wouldn't wanna say.. we should have a massive campaign to get more women into higher roles and more men into that.. but I think it is.. definitely about making sure that our workforce.. has the education it needs [...] I don't think organisations.. put much effort to it... and optional management training for grade 3 employees.. I think anybody at any grade should be able to get management training.. [...] somebody lower down is far more likely to need it and don't we want.. the people to get the training before they've actually been thrown in the deep end and make mistakes (L6)

L6 argues that providing *everyone* with enhanced development and progression opportunities would 'naturally' result in an improved gender balance (cf. later on for further discussion). In order to increase opportunities for career development and internal progression across CSU Schools and services, M7 argues in favour of the professionalization of HEA, and the creation of a 'professional line':

It is actually about [...] thinking about what the professional development framework might be [...] because if we're to get.. [...] the best out of colleagues here and for them to feel happiest if they are people that want to progress and feel.. motivated.. we have to actually start addressing this issue [...] it's about what opportunities can we.. create for people.. to... get some experience which might then broaden things out.. which gives them a better opportunity.. either here or outside.. to get the job that they want to do [...] but we don't recognise this as a profession... and people who go in and out of this profession in the way that you can go out of finance or HR or IT or any of those recognised professions [...] and therefore we haven't really got that much hope in motivating people.. and enabling people to progress... if they want to do that (M7)

The professionalisation of HEA could not only help address the lack of internal career progression at KCTPs; it could also challenge the devaluation of university admin work as “just admin” (cf. 11.2.2c) – but only if these roles were included in the profession rather than dismissed as ‘routine clerical tasks’ (Whitchurch 2004a: 282; cf. Chapter 2).

Despite conveying support for administrators’ development and progression, interviewees express disagreement as to how this should be enabled. Managers talk about initiatives in contrasting ways. For examples, job shadowing is described by L6 as ‘creepy’, but by M1 as the ‘non-scary option’; secondment opportunities, praised by some, are critiqued by e.g. M2 and M4 because they ‘create instability within teams’. The initiative which interviewees consistently contest is, as previously noted, women-only networks, mentoring schemes and management programmes (e.g. LFHE’s Aurora⁵⁷). Some managers draw on the “poor men” discourse (cf. 11.1.1) to argue against these initiatives:

I hate anything like that.. no.. we don't need this--<@there's plenty of women in university administration we don't need women-only things.. that is just.. biased towards men @> (M13)

I think some of the.. [*women-only*] initiatives are taking away from men... and I don't think that should.. be allowed either (L7)

Those who do not draw on the “poor men” discourse tend to stress the need to get men on board to effect culture change, and/or critique the “fix the women” (cf. 9.2) approach that some women-only initiatives may be seen as promoting:

A lot of the men consider it [*i.e. Aurora*].. just some sort of women's club.. so... getting more men involved in that is key (M2)

I'd be really... (1) intrigued if I could get on the Aurora programme... <@just to see what that is about@>... what is it that they.. think needs to be taught to a woman.. for her to... <@achieve like a man you know!@> (M4)

Although acting at KCTPs and culture change are considered separately here for clarity, participants do establish links between these two areas. Enhancing the career development and progression prospects of administrators would not just require cultural changes, but also result in further improvements to the HE(A) “culture”:

⁵⁷ CSU participants tend to get confused between LFHE’s Aurora and ECU’s Athena SWAN, probably due to the minimal engagement with Athena SWAN that CSU had had at the time of the data collection. Leavers who were at the time working at other universities with Athena SWAN awards (e.g. L5, L6, L7) articulate the difference between the two, expressing support for Athena SWAN but not for women-only initiatives such as Aurora.

I think it... starts lower down though.. as soon as anybody starts we should be.. looking at their.. career progression and.. we should be encouraging them to.. go up the scale.. and not imposing limitations there's no reason why someone starting with us now on a grade 2 can't be a grade 7 [...] and they should be actively encouraged even.. if that means... you do end up <@losing them!@> [...] it's in the.. best interest of them and the university as a whole.. that they progress.. that they take their knowledge with them.. and therefore our... <@leaders@> are the ones that have experience of all roles.. and have a better understanding of.. what it means to <@be an administrator@> (M1)

Enabling administrators' progression would result not only in better gender balance but also, M1 argues, in leaders who understand 'what it means to be an administrator', i.e. in further culture change. It would, put differently, contribute to challenging the "them and us" divide based on the devaluation of university admin work.

Participants' tendency to talk about progression and/or suggest enhancing progression opportunities when asked about how to change to the gender imbalance can also, however, be interpreted as potentially working to ideological effects. Participants' tendency to shift the discussion towards career progression is sometimes so strong that it leads me to change the wording of the last question, effectively moving the topic of discussion away from the gender imbalance (and potential gender inequality/discrimination) to progression for *all*:

Gabby: Is this gender distribution something you'd like to see changed
All: Erm...
Mel: I think so.. but I don't know if it would help to improve -- I think the most important thing for me is progression in an administrative role.. and I don't know if being a woman.. (HH) really helps or hinders me.. so even if that were to change.. I don't think it would affect my... goal?... so I'm not really that.. fussed
Vanessa: I think it should always be the best.. person for the job.. no matter what their gender is
[...]
Gabby: Okay a:nd.. any other suggestions.. if not to change the gender distribution.. to help *people* who want to progress (FG9)

Put differently, participants' focus on their own career progression often works to overshadow discussions of structural gender inequalities: it effectively shifts the discussion from the gender imbalance as a manifestation of potential gender inequality/discrimination towards individualised issues and solutions.

At times, however, when participants answer about progression their "progression talk" does entail contesting dominant gendered discourses and assumptions:

I think the issue is with what experience the people on the lower grades are... exposed to.. and what opportunities they're given [...] it's development once they're actually doing the role.. just because a woman's happy to just do admin.. it doesn't mean she's not happy to get some more... processes experience (Samya, FG2)

The lack of development and progression opportunities administrators reportedly experience is reframed by Samya as the material consequence of the *gendered* devaluation of university admin: it is female – not all – administrators who are reportedly assumed to be ‘happy to do just admin’. It is therefore this gendered assumption, part of the divisive “them and us” HE culture but also expression of gender inequality, which ought to change in order for the gender imbalance – not just progression opportunities – to change and improve.

The next sub-section looks more closely at participants’ talk about “culture” and “culture change”.

11.2.2. “Culture change”

In the data sets, “culture” is often used as a catchall term, in elusive, amorphous ways, and is frequently left undefined. Because of this, patterns were difficult to identify. Here, participants’ co-produced talk which was coded as “culture-related” is organised into three areas for action and change: a) paternity leave; b) flexible working; c) the gendered devaluation of university admin and the gendered “them and us” HE culture. Paternity leave and flexible working are considered as culture-related areas for action because participants tend to talk about them not simply as standalone initiatives, but also as requiring, and potentially resulting into, change in organisational culture⁵⁸.

a. *Paternity leave*

Talk about paternity/parental leave is a relatively thin pattern in the data sets. It is not suggested by FG participants (except for pilot FG2), and is only elaborated upon by M2 and M4. Five out of seven leavers talk about it, which again may point to their relatively less institutionally-constrained position compared to CSU participants. The relative scarcity of talk about paternity/parental leave, i.e. one of the ways to address what is regularly constructed as *the* issue behind the gender imbalance, is meaningful. It supports previous discussions of participants’ tendency to explain the imbalance away as the result of motherhood and childcare (cf. 10.2) as working to

⁵⁸ This is an approach shared with ECU’s Athena SWAN Charter, which considers flexible working and leave in the *Organisation and Culture* section of the application.

ideological effects, i.e. as legitimising the status quo and closing down opportunities for change.

Those who do talk about paternity/shared parental leave do not necessarily express support: for example, L7 mentions 'practical considerations' (Wetherell et al. 1987) to argue that 'certain roles' do not allow for it:

Without being more specific [...] there are certain roles that allow for it and certain roles that can't [...] and it also depends on duration.. how much leave are they wanting off.. how realistic is it for someone then to just step in or step out (L7)

L7's matter-of-fact statement closes down opportunities for action. He does not need to be 'more specific', due to participants' tendency to construct career breaks and flexible working as unsuitable for higher-grade roles (cf. 10.2.2).

L6 also cites some practical considerations around cover for leave; on other hand, she also expresses strong support for the cultural changes that shared parental/paternity leave would bring about, e.g. degendering (child)care:

We need to make sure that men have respect because.. I actually find it quite... disheartening the way.. stay-at-home dads.. are seen as.. a bit weak or.. "ah you're doing women's work aren't you".. whereas actually raising your child and bonding with it.. I think that's so precious... I think it will actually make... (1) people better workers because they will understand what it's like to leave your baby? and they will understand what it's like to be working from home.. and I think that from that perspective it will have a massive impact on how... we view anybody who's done maternity leave.. because.. we'll understand that no your brain does not go to mush.. and we'll understand that yes it's totally reasonable that we have to go at 5... and I think.. that is one of the biggest.. steps forwards.. in history (L6)

As L1 points out however, 'only 15 days', i.e. the current paternity leave paid provision, is not going to effect "culture change". HEA, discursively constructed as a family-friendly sector, should be particularly willing/well-placed to enhance leave allowance, for example by following the German/Scandinavian model (e.g. L1, M4).

In the excerpt above, L6 also states that paternity leave would make people 'understand that no your brain does not go to mush [...] and] that yes it's totally reasonable that we have to go at 5'. It would, therefore, contest two assumptions at the basis of participants' tendency to explain all away with motherhood and childcare. The first is the long-hour and presenteeist culture which constructs flexible working as unsuitable for higher-grade roles (cf. sub-section b. below). The second is the "typing pool stereotype" (Beck, FG6; cf. Chapters 9 & 10), i.e. the assumption that because their brain goes 'to mush', women-as-mothers can only cope with allegedly easy, mundane, routine, i.e. discursively devalued, work (cf. sub-section c. below).

b. Flexible working

“Flexible working” is constructed in various ways in the data sets: sometimes, it only denotes part-time working, other times it also includes job-sharing; sometimes it means working flexibly, i.e. arriving late or leaving early to do the “school run”, other times working 9-5, i.e. rather inflexible, standard office hours, is said to allow women to juggle work and family commitments.

On the one hand, the construction of “flexibility” as not working out of pre-established hours, i.e. as rigid, predictable working hours without seepage, suggests a revaluing of “traditional” patterns of full-time work. It competes with current conceptions of flexible working, which often result in working “all the time”, i.e. in the intensification and extensification of work (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). On the other hand, participants’ tendency to construct flexible working as a childcare-related requirement of women-as-mothers exclusively, and as unsuitable for higher-grade, strategic roles, was critiqued in Chapter 10. It was interpreted as part of the ideological force of the “motherhood and childcare” account, which ends up naturalising the gender imbalance and closing down opportunities for action and change.

This sub-section focuses on participants’ talk about *enabling* flexible working as a culture-related action to change the gender imbalance. For example, M4 and L5 express support for job-sharing and flexible working, also on higher grades:

Higher education is a bit stuck maybe with.. – or distrustful in people actually doing their work if they're not sitting at their desk.. you know? and that maybe we need to.. <@ modernise a bit@> ... because academics obviously... they work well from wherever and... we trust them <@obviously@> [...] so we just need to accommodate it.. so maybe.. break out of these.. traditional ways of working to allow women in.. in that situation to [...] be... on the higher grades (M4)

More flexibility in work... more.. job-shares.. in leadership roles.. higher grades that are part-time or [...] very open to being shared.. because.. some people who.. you know I've talked to who... are... parents.. or you know.. other reasons and they would like that flexible working.. and there's never any part-time jobs that are.. grade 5s and 6s... they're never advertised part-time or job-share particularly (L5)

As these quotes show, encouraging flexible working and job-sharing on higher-grades can run the risk of reinforcing, rather than challenging, its construction as an exclusively childcare-related requirement of women-as-mothers. However, M4 also challenges the culture of presenteeism and distrust which characterises “traditional” ways of working in HEA, pointing out how it only applies to “non-academic” staff (also cf. McLean, 1996; Burton, 1997; Tong, 2014). L5 suggests that flexible working might be required for ‘other reasons’, and so does M3:

If people wanted to do that then they should be allowed to do that so therefore there needs to be.. some kind of cultural change I think.. if you're going to get the best out of people.. and it isn't just about allowing people with childcare or.. you know carers -- obviously... their lives are.. harder to balance but I think everyone for their own sanity should be able to at least have.. some.. flexibility.. as long as.. it meant that the work was getting done (M3)

What these quotes suggest is the need not only to support flexible working, but also to value it as much as much as more “traditional” working patterns:

I'd like to think that... you know I would like children.. and if had that that my job would be secure.. that I'd come back.. and I'd be... considered for promotion just the same as everyone else.. I mean I have a... single mother in my team and initially.. I had to sort of.. really think it through and now it's very easy we've got... that kind of flexible working [... *arrangement*] we've worked out.. [...] but it's me and her who've built that up (M2)

People are sometimes judged by how much time they spend at their desk or in the office rather than how efficient they are (L2)

These quotes not only support flexible working; they also contest HEA's dominant construction as a flexible, family/female-friendly, meritocratic sector, and in so doing they reconstruct it as in need of substantial cultural change. Flexible working ought to be more 'accepted' (FG3), valued (and promoted, cf. M2 above), but also degendered. This also involves contesting the assumption that flexible working can only ever be enabled in allegedly easy, mundane, unimportant work such as discursively devalued lower-level university admin.

c. Revaluing and degendering university admin work: challenging the gendered “them and us” culture

The need to contest the discursive devaluation (cf. Chapter 6), feminisation (cf. Chapter 8) and their interplay, i.e. the gendered devaluation (cf. Chapter 9) of university admin in order to promote change is a thread traceable throughout this thesis. Some participants argue that the “culture” ought to change in order for the gender imbalance to change:

There's a certain assumption that women do a certain [*type of work*]... I think it-it-it-it -- the culture just needs to.. slightly change (Majid, FG8)

There's also something around.. academic staff as well particularly where it's.. quite male-dominated.. but actually probably where it's quite female-dominated as well.. that culture.. about what is it.. what is the nature of the role that's been done.. it's not the same now as it was five ten fifteen twenty years ago.. it's evolved because of the way in which universities have evolved... and you need some really bright people doing those jobs.. for the students and for the academic staff (M7)

The “culture” that both Majid and M7 seem to be referring to is the gendered “them and us” divide in HE, based on the gendered devaluation of university admin work. It was previously argued (cf. 11.1.1; 11.2.1a) that attempts to revalue university admin work should avoid relying on the devaluation of women’s work or on our ‘cultural overvaluation of men’ (Williams, 1993b: 7).

Participants collectively appear to get entangled in a potentially vicious argumentative circle. They argue both for the need to first act to change the “culture”, as this would result in a better gender balance, and to first act on gender representation (e.g. on KCTPs) in order to change the “culture”:

I think it's just a case of changing opinions and then I think more men would then apply... and more line managers would then select their applications to interview (Mel, FG9)

I think.. it is just a case of having.. more women at the top.. there was an [*open meeting*] once and... someone asked a question about the fact that the whole of the [*CSU senior management team was male apart from one woman*] and... [*a male senior manager's*] answer was.. “Anne! [*clicks fingers*] Anne come here!”... because she was the only female in the team.. and I... was just like “oh my god you can't even answer the question yourself... you've got to call a woman to answer the question”... but if you had.. say.. 3 or 4 women there on the front with them.. well.. the question would never even have been asked (M2)

Acting to improve gender representation across roles and grades and acting to change the “culture” or “opinions” need not be mutually exclusive or sequential. A few participants argue that both can and should be part of a holistic, systematic, embedded approach to change.

11.2.3. Taking a holistic, systematic, embedded approach to change

Some interviewees argue for a more holistic approach, for example by encouraging the adoption and promotion of most or all of the initiatives presented to them:

All these seem great to be honest.. <@we should be doing all of them@> (M1)

I think.. all of them have their value? .. so I think you need all of them.. and.. some of them are more effective at some things and other things are more effective at other things because.. (HH) you can have blind applications.. but if women don't feel confident enough to apply for the job.. you're not gonna get female applications anyway.. so you need to start... supporting women.. to say yeah of course you can do this... and then.. when they apply.. you've got <@blind applications and then.. when they go for interview they get a diverse interview panel.. and.. if they want to they can get a job-share!@> and paternity leave (L1)

What L1’s quote suggests is that not only do all these initiatives have their value and address different things, but it is only when they are all put in place for specific reasons, i.e. they are targeted to specific issues that, taken together, they can enable

change. Put differently, the approach needs to be holistic but also systematic and targeted.

Monitoring and collecting data about the gender imbalance is suggested by some interviewees as an example of systematic approach that demonstrates that issues are being taken seriously. They argue that universities – not just CSU – should be incentivised but most importantly held accountable for their actions (or lack thereof):

Regular reviews of.. your.. pay gaps and gender gaps and... universities can have.. or should be.. made to.. or.. it could be part of the.. HEFCE funding? or.. the national student survey? that they have criteria where they have to.. pledge.. or say that they're working to review their.. gender gap and they're gonna have.. by this.. date.. no gender gap.. by this year.. and then.. if you do it.. then your brownie points.. go up and more students and more research funding.. and more everything else (L1)

Unless they're held accountable for it... unless you're asking for parity and somebody's checking them thinking.. I'm gonna observe this see how this goes... then people might behave in a certain way [...] so how many people apply.. how many get shortlisted (M8)

What L1 and M8, among others, appear to be proposing is, broadly speaking, the approach promoted by ECU's Athena SWAN Charter (ECU, 2017), expanded in 2015 to include PS staff. The application for an Athena SWAN award requires both quantitative (e.g. number and percentages of staff by gender at KCTPs) and qualitative (e.g. staff consultation, policies and practice) data analysis, and the preparation of and commitment to a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) set of actions, targeted to the issues identified by the data analysis. It focuses on data benchmarking, to ensure continuous improvement, and covers KCTPs as well as cultural issues (ECU, 2017). Engaging further with Athena SWAN is one of this study's recommendations (cf. Chapter 12).

There is evidence of resistance to Athena SWAN (among CSU participants as well as the sector at large: cf. Caffrey et al., 2016; 55th Maudsley Debate, 2016, Ovseiko et al. 2017). As previously noted (cf. footnote 57, p.248) resistance to Athena SWAN among CSU participants appears to be linked to CSU's limited previous engagement with it at the time of the data collection. Participants express scepticism about CSU's potential "lip service" or "box-ticking" approach to it and to change generally speaking:

It isn't seen as a process it's seen as a tick-box exercise and I don't think that's the right way to... go about things (M3)

It feels very token.. I think we're in a very token gesture.. environment.. As you probably know our Athena SWAN application failed.. it should have failed [...]

because it was.. not an embedded approach.. it was basically trying to box-tick.. and that didn't work.. so I'm pleased it didn't pass cos it sent another signal to say.. we have to do something about this (M7)

As previously noted, because of her position as a female senior manager in a male-dominated environment, M7 is able and willing to strongly articulate her support for change. She promotes an embedded approach, which she defines as a committed, integrated response to specific structural issues that are taken seriously as issues:

So what next? we can't just do these small interventions.. thinking we're doing something good to help gender equality.. if we don't have an embedded approach that we then take through and then that influences other things that we do.. [...] what are we going to do in an integrated way how are we going to invest in that? to actually make.. it.. work? it's not only about.. adverts that say.. "we encourage applications from women".. it's about the picture that we create and the commitment that we have to sorting this out [...] and it's really difficult for CSU I think cos actually.. you can see it in other institutions but you can really see it here.. [...] it's not an embedded... approach... and as I said that's not the fault of the HR department -- and that's the other problem.. the HR department is often told.. this is a HR issue.. it's not.. It's a culture and leadership issue of the organisation [...] we really really need to do it.. not as a sort of add-on but as an integrated part of what we're doing (M7)

This account has potentially emancipatory effects. As previously noted however, it is co-produced by a small number of participants and articulated explicitly only by M7, which somehow weakens its subversive potential. The thesis conclusion does therefore not only summarise this study's insights on discursive barriers (cf. 12.1) and further highlight the potentially emancipatory effects of counter-discourses and accounts discussed in Chapters 6-11 (cf. 12.2). It also reflects on the effects of positionality in terms of access to and subversive potential of such counter-discourses and accounts (cf. 12.2) and considers ways in which to widen access to counter-discourses and potentially emancipatory accounts in order to promote discursive change (cf. 12.2 and 12.3.3).

Chapter 12. Conclusion

This conclusion brings together insights from the “results” chapters, summing up previous discussion of discursive barriers and damaging gendered discourses, and answering the overarching research question (cf. 12.1). Section 12.2 provides research recommendations for discursive change, aiming to move on from deconstruction and critique to discursive reconstruction. Table 8 provides a reminder (from Section 4.1.2) of working definitions of terms (used throughout the thesis) which are particularly key to this conclusion chapter:

DECONSTRUCTION and CRITIQUE (cf. 12.1)	RECONSTRUCTION and REDISCURSIVISATION (cf. 12.2)
of discourses and accounts (i.e. language use) which end up LEGITIMISING / SUPPORTING / SUSTAINING the gender-imbalanced/unequal status quo	Using / Promoting the use of counter-discourses and accounts which have the potential to CONTEST / SUBVERT / DISRUPT the gender-imbalanced / unequal status quo
DISCURSIVE BARRIER / DAMAGING DISCOURSE: refer to a discourse or account used to ideological effects (where 'used to' does not imply intentionality; cf. 12.1)	SUBVERSIVE / COUNTER-DISCOURSE: refers to a discourse or account used in ways which contest a damaging discourse; also used to refer to instances where a damaging discourse is drawn upon in ways which end up contesting it; cf. 12.2
IDEOLOGICAL: critiques the effects of a situated use of a given discourse or account which ends up legitimising (supporting/sustaining) the gender-imbalanced/unequal status quo, thus closing down opportunities for action and change.	EMANCIPATORY: refers to the effects of a situated use of a given discourse or account which ends up contesting, and thus has the potential to subvert / disrupt, the gender-imbalanced / unequal status quo, thus opening up opportunities for action and change.

Table 8: From deconstruction and critique to discursive reconstruction.

Finally, Section 12.3 discusses this study’s contributions and limitations, as well as areas for further research.

12.1. Discursive barriers and damaging gendered discourses

The overall aim of this study was to explore local, situated (gendered) discourses about university admin work and the gender imbalance in HEA, in order to identify, critique, and ultimately promote action against discursive barriers to change in the gender-imbalanced/unequal status quo. This involved analysing CSU participants’ co-constructed talk about entering, leaving and progressing (or not) in HEA, about university admin work, and their patterned ways to account for HEA/CSU’s horizontally and vertically gender-imbalanced staff profile.

Critiquing how participants ended up talking themselves out of the need for action and change was particularly key due to the social transformation aims of this study. This section provides a summary of the gendered discourses, discursive constructions and patterned accounts co-produced in the data sets, which work as discursive barriers to change in the gender-imbalanced status quo.

The devaluation of university admin work

The dominant, sectorial devaluation of university admin as ‘routine clerical tasks’ (Whitchurch, 2004a: 282) was traced in participants’ patterned ways of talking about entering, leaving and progressing in HEA, and about their relations with managers and academic colleagues. Participants regularly spoke about – sometimes upholding, sometimes contesting – how university admin is considered as easy, boring, mundane, unimportant, cushy, “just admin” work (cf. 6.1). They consistently constructed it as work which one falls into but does not choose, and whose perks are not strictly work-related (cf. 6.2). Those who do such work, participants argued, are looked down on by insiders and outsiders as ‘pencil-pushing all-talk people’ (Nikki, FG7), lacking ambition, motivation and authority; as the “servants” of HE, administrators are a ‘forgotten cog’ (Amala, FG2; cf. 6.3 & 6.4).

It was argued that the damaging effects of the discursive devaluation of university admin go beyond limiting the subject positions available to participants in discourse. For example, the devaluation of admin work was made sense of by FG participants as diminishing their chances of progression (e.g. 7.1) and/by sustaining a “them and us” divide, not only with academic staff, but also with (senior) managers. This study also argued that the devaluation of admin work(ers) is a discursive barrier, in that it has so far resulted in a lack of attention and action to change the gender-imbalanced profile of the ‘forgotten workforce’ (Tong, 2014), and in the tendency to dismiss it as not an issue (in the literature: cf. 2.3, and in the data sets: cf. 8.3, Chapter 10).

Gender differences discourse(s) at work

When asked to account for the horizontal gender imbalance, participants tended to discursively feminise the ideal university admin worker, by drawing on elements (i.e. sub-discourses) of an overarching gender differences discourse. Women were constructed as (stereo)typically possessing each and every “skill” or ability required in university admin, and being (considered as) better at each and every aspect of these roles. When women were said to be *naturally* better at communicating, caring,

and multi-tasking, their overrepresentation in university admin was legitimised as merit-based; men were simultaneously constructed as “not good enough” (cf. 8.3).

Whenever women’s “superiority” at all things admin-related was framed as stereotypical, participants also contested the legitimacy of the horizontal gender imbalance (8.3). Some of the ways in which participants did so were nevertheless critiqued as not necessarily working to emancipatory effects. Some participants argued that the horizontal imbalance is the result of “positive discrimination” in favour of women, and that men – notwithstanding their relative overrepresentation in more prestigious, higher-paid HEA work – are the disadvantaged sex. Consequently, by drawing on what I named a “poor men” discourse, participants argued in favour of a better gender balance in HEA by constructing HEA as already “female-dominated”, despite the *vertical* gender imbalance. This patterned account was critiqued as having ideological effects, i.e. as moving the attention away from who, *generally speaking*, benefits from – or is disadvantaged by – the gender-imbalanced status quo, and thus as working to close down opportunities for progressive change.

The gendered devaluation of university admin work and the gendered “them and us” HE culture

Participants regularly accounted for the over-representation of women in lower-level admin work by gendering its devaluation. Put differently, they frequently argued that university admin is considered as women’s work in that it is devalued work, and devalued in that it is considered as women’s work. All the previously-cited gender differences, allegedly making women “superior” and better administrators, were reframed, when accounting for the vertical gender imbalance, as making them better at devalued work: their (stereo)typical patience with “customers”, their ability to cope with easy, boring work and be ‘happy to just do admin’ (Samya, FG2), their “willingness” to be deferential and subservient.

Men, conversely, were re-constructed from being “not good enough” to being “too good” for this boring, mundane, routine, demeaning work. Due to their (stereo)typical ambition, career-drive and ability to focus and specialise (which women were said to lack), men were also said to (be encouraged to) ‘aim for bigger and better jobs’ (M13, cf. 9.2), i.e. managerial/specialised work. When accounting for the vertical gender imbalance, administrators’ and managers’ reported lack of progression was thus reframed as a “gender issue”, i.e. as paradoxically affecting mainly women, or, rather, women-as-mothers in family/female-friendly HEA (cf. below).

Gendering the devaluation of admin work upon which the “them and us” divide is based led participants to gender the “them and us” divide itself. Previously-established binary oppositions (e.g. administrators vs. (senior) managers/academics; public vs. private sector) were consistently re-constructed as gendered. Female participants also mentioned episodes of gender- (and status-)differential treatment. Such manifestations of a gendered “them and us” culture were, however, rarely if ever made sense of by those who told them as evidence of the existence of gender inequality/discrimination in HEA. HEA was consistently constructed as a family/female-friendly, egalitarian and meritocratic employment sector.

The discursive construction of HEA as family/female-friendly

In the second half of the research encounters, the perks of working in HEA were reframed as gendered, i.e. as incentives that particularly ‘suit you as a woman.. especially if you've got kids’ (Vanessa, FG9). HEA was consistently constructed as offering job security and flexible working, ‘things that you wouldn’t get in other industries’ (Jack, FG1); as a family/female-friendly employment sector, where (new) mothers can feel safe ‘because they can’t be discriminated’ against (M4). By making a strikingly regular rhetorical move – answering about mothers when asked about women – participants ended up constructing all women in HEA as mothers and explaining both the horizontal and vertical gender imbalance away as the result of motherhood and childcare.

Women-as-mothers’ overrepresentation in university admin roles in particular was accounted for by relying on the “typing pool stereotype” (Beck, FG6), a metaphor for the gendered devaluation of university admin. University admin roles were said to provide women-as-mothers with easy, routine, mundane, less ‘stressful’ (M11) work, thus allowing them to juggle their family commitments. Being made up of easy, non-‘vital’ (M2), ‘routine clerical tasks’ (Whitchurch, 2004a: 282), participants argued, university admin work can also be easily divided up into part-time/job-sharing/flexible work. Flexible working was constructed as working fixed, standard office hours (9-5) with some flexibility around the edges. This working pattern was in turn consistently constructed by participants not only as required exclusively by women-as-mothers, but also as unsuitable for professional, managerial, strategic, i.e. higher-grade, roles.

Talking about women in HEA as though all of them were mothers worked to reinforce HEA’s construction as a family- and *therefore* female-friendly employment sector – thus accounting for the over-representation of women in entry-level university admin roles. This construction was not contested when accounting for the vertical

gender imbalance, because women-as-mothers were said not to progress for reasons framed as obvious, natural, common-sense, and inevitable.

This study argued that HEA's construction as a family- and *therefore* female-friendly sector and the concurrent tendency to 'explain it all away with motherhood' (L6) and childcare are thus only apparently contradictory. Their interplay has the ideological effect to close down opportunities for action and change. Answering about mothers when asked about women allowed participants to get away without talking about other determinants of gender inequality/discrimination. Gender inequality was thus repudiated not only for women who are not mothers, but also for those who are. The vertical gender imbalance was naturalised as the unfortunate but "necessary", and inevitable, "side effect" of motherhood and childcare, hence not a sign of disadvantage.

The discursive construction of HEA as meritocratic

Participants explained the gender-imbalanced status quo away as the side effect not only of motherhood and childcare, but also of meritocracy. In particular, when accounting for the vertical gender imbalance, they legitimised it as the outcome of merit-based appointment and promotion decisions based on (apparently) gender-neutral criteria (e.g. experience accumulated by working for a 'longer and steadier' period of time, long hours and without career breaks). In HEA, it just so happens that the "best candidates" for senior roles tend to be men.

Participants also consistently stated that they would not like to see the imbalance change at the expense of competence, and/or by promoting women *just because* they are women. The tendency was thus to construct HEA as already egalitarian and meritocratic: any initiatives to change the status quo were, within this patterned account, rejected as "making gender relevant" where it is not.

The discursive construction of HEA as egalitarian

When asked directly whether gender (or being a woman/man) could be, or had been, an advantage, barrier or simply somehow relevant in their HEA experience, participants regularly answered that gender is irrelevant. In other words, they rarely if ever explicitly made sense of the gender imbalance, the gendered devaluation of university admin work, and the episodes of gender-differential treatment they themselves told, as the manifestation of gender inequality or discrimination. HEA was frequently constructed as an already egalitarian employment sector, where 'people get jobs for doing their job' (L7).

Participants also drew on elements of a postfeminist sensibility which Gill and colleagues (2017) have traced in neoliberal workplaces. For example, they accounted for the gender imbalance (and the potential for gender inequality/discrimination) by locating it elsewhere, i.e. not in their team, office, CSU, or HEA sector at large, and by constructing it as the residual effect of past gender inequality. Denying the relevance of gender when accounting for the gender-imbalanced status quo, this study argued, ultimately works to legitimise and sustain it, closing down opportunities for change.

12.2. Promoting discursive change: from deconstruction and critique to discursive reconstruction

As Cameron puts it, 'there is more to be done than simply discourse analysis' (1998: 966): deconstruction, explanation and critique are the first step, 'one of the conditions' upon which change may occur (Ibid.). In line with the social transformation aims of critical realist discursive research, Willig argues that 'our collective discourse analysis must [...] have something to say about how things can be improved [...] and] be committed to interventionist work' (1999: 48-9). In other words, it should deconstruct in order to promote discursive re-construction. Yardley expresses a similar idea:

It is not sufficient to develop a sensitive, thorough and plausible analysis, if the ideas propounded by the researcher have no influence on the beliefs or actions of anyone else. [...] R]esearch [...] should] contribute[...] to a change in the way we think or talk (2000: 223).

Critical realist, feminist discursive research theorises discourse(s) as having potentially damaging effects and material consequences on 'real women and men' (Cameron 2003: 448), and as going beyond the discursive 'in the form of material violence and disadvantage' (Sunderland, 2004: 196). Such research therefore aims to effect discursive change via 'explicit contestation of the existing social order through language' (Ibid: 198).

Critical realist discursive research, however, theorises change as 'not simply change in discourse' (Fairclough, 2005: 931) and the relationships between discursive and material change as contingent (Ibid). As discourse is theorised as a social practice, discursive change would – or at least could – result in practical change (i.e. change in practice) and material change (e.g. change to the gender-unequal status quo). Holloway argues that discursive changes and social changes are inextricably linked, each type of change making the other possible:

it is through [...] social changes [...] that alternative discourses [...] can be produced and used [...] thus challenging sexist [or, generally speaking, damaging] discourses still further (1984; cited in Sunderland, 2004: 215)

What discursive change entails and its relationship with material change have been the focus of several discursive analysts' theoretical work. This section draws on some key texts (mainly Fairclough, 2005 and Sunderland, 2004) to provide a working definition of what form 'intervention in discourse' (Sunderland, 2004: 191) and discursive change might take, and to introduce this study's recommendations. The question that this section aims to address is how the interplaying discursive barriers critiqued in this thesis (and summarised in 12.1) can be challenged: put differently, how discursive change can occur, so that practical and material change (e.g. to the gender imbalance) *may* occur.

Discursive change can be effected, Sunderland (2004) argues, by contesting networks of interplaying damaging discourses with counter-discourses (or subversive discourses) used in emancipatory ways (i.e. in ways which contest/disrupt the gender-unequal status quo, cf. Table 8, p.257). Because of their 'unbounded, unstable, fluctuating nature, and the enduring potential for interdiscursivity', even common-sense, 'dominant discourses can be "interrupted" [...] "troubled" or "disturbed"', and there is always 'potential for change' (Ibid: 203, also cf. 4.1.2).

Change may occur in the tension between individual/collective discursive agency and the structural boundaries of what is relatively "sayable". As discourses operate in networks, the potential for change resides in these systems of discursive relations being 'more or less stable and durable, or stable in some parts and unstable in others, more or less resistant to change or open to change' (Fairclough, 2005: 925). Discursive change can thus be theorised as 'talk[ing change] into (and action[ing it] into) acceptability' (Sunderland, 2004: 214).

Sunderland proposes six ways in which discursive change can be effected – or at least stimulated:

- 1) *'Deconstruction of discourses through meta-discoursal critique';*
- 2) *'Principled, intentional, re-iterated non-use of discourses seen as damaging';*
- 3) *'Principled but non-confrontational use of discourses perceived as non-damaging', which, once produced, can be 're-circulated and recontextualised in a range of [...] speech events, competing with non-progressive discourses';*
- 4) *'Principled, confrontational use of discourses perceived as non-damaging'. This can be done in private as well as in public and 'is not the province of only those who perceive themselves as activists';*
- 5) *'Facilitated group discoursal intervention by people other than DA / feminists'. This could be done in collaboration with HE practitioners and/or*

- professionals, as they are in a position to resist, contest and rediscursivise (cf. 5 below) in policy and practice.*
- 6) 'Rediscursivisation': 'rethink and rearticulate a text using a different discourse from that in the original [... as] a form of subject repositioning'.
(Adapted from Sunderland, 2004: 203-209)

While the previous section (12.1) summarised this study's deconstruction and critique of discursive barriers co-constructed in the data sets, this section aims to promote discursive reconstruction and change. Sub-section 12.2.1 flags up the potentially emancipatory effects of instances from the data sets where participants contested the damaging discourses and discursive barriers discussed in 12.1, and co-produced counter-discourses. Section 12.2.2 provides some examples of how I already have, to some extent, engaged with points 2-4 above through my research-related involvement in the sector.

12.2.1. Research recommendations for discursive change

The damaging (gendered) discourses and discursive barriers critiqued throughout this thesis (and in 12.1) for their ideological effects were, to various degrees, contested by participants during the research encounters. In order to promote discursive change, this section aims to flag up the potentially emancipatory effects of instances where participants challenged dominant, damaging discourses/accounts. "Emancipatory" is, as previously, used to refer to the potential effects of counter-discourses and accounts to contest the gender-imbalanced/unequal status quo (cf. 4.1.2 and Table 8, p.257) and therefore open up opportunities for progressive change.

It is argued that discursive change may occur via the 'principled *non-use* of discourses seen as damaging' and the 'principled (non-)confrontational *use* of discourses perceived as non-damaging' (Sunderland, 2004: 203; cf. 12.1 and below), in private and public, by *all* HE staff who share the transformational aims of this study.

Contesting the discursive devaluation of university admin work

Instances where participants contested the devaluation of university admin work were discussed in Section 6.5:

It's not a boring job.. things are always changing... there is always an opportunity to learn about something different (Beck, FG6)

I didn't think it was.. a particularly important job [...] but I was <@very wrong... we work hard!@> (M12)

I thought.. it would be a lot less stressful [...] I viewed it as a bit more.. mundane? [...] I didn't think it was gonna be that creative and I didn't realise how much of an impact I could make (L6)

This counter-discourse is already, though marginally, circulating in the sector. It was traced in some of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, almost exclusively produced by administrators (e.g. Butler, 2014; Pearson 2008; Tong, 2014). It was a consistent pattern in the FG data set, and was also drawn upon by some interviewees in ways discussed as potentially emancipatory. Managers, like those interviewed, who progressed from clerical grades are in an arguably privileged position to contest, via policy and (discursive) practice, the dominant devaluation of university admin work, along with the divisive “them and us” culture and the lack of institutional investment in this staff grouping it sustains.

As suggested in 12.3.3, future research could investigate whether traces of this counter-discourse are being more widely produced; it could take the form of rediscursivisation activities (e.g. ‘changing the way we pitch roles’, M7) to further promote discursive change. The revaluation of university admin should not, however, be encouraged *in order* to get more men to do it. Rather, in order to eventually result in discursive and – possibly – material change (such as an improved gender balance), it should be promoted as part of systematic contestation of the discursive barriers it interplays with (e.g. the gender differences discourse).

Contesting the gender differences discourse(s) at work

Some instances of participants contesting the gender differences discourse and its sub-discourses were provided in Chapters 8 and 9. There are other examples in the data sets:

So we're saying.. well clearly women are better at all of these jobs and it's like.. well... yes because that's the skill-set we're taught should be ours... that's what we're fuddled into... what we're taught from an early age (Nikki, FG7)

Anywhere where... (1) it's viewed as needing a tough -- being able to take a hard line or.. being able to negotiate.. I think there being a man.. would be an advantage.. I don't think... necessarily to do the job.. but it would be perceived as an advantage... I met plenty of tough women [...] so that's complete.. rubbish.. they're quite capable of negotiation thank you very much (L6)

Allegedly natural sex differences were consistently evoked in the data sets to legitimise the gender-imbalanced status quo as merit-based or “just the way the world is” (cf. 10.1.3): contesting the gender differences discourse and its sub-discourses thus has potentially emancipatory effects. As previously noted, however, when sex differences were critiqued as stereotypical, the gender differences discourse was sometimes equally drawn upon to ideological effects. For example, when women were re-constructed as only stereotypically better at admin work, the horizontal

imbalance was simultaneously re-constructed as the result of “positive discrimination” in favour of women. This was achieved by drawing on another damaging gendered discourse – the “poor men” discourse, which constructs men as disadvantaged despite their overrepresentation on higher HEA grades.

In order to have potentially emancipatory effects, contesting the gender differences discourse should highlight where dis/advantage lies in a gender-imbalanced sector such as HEA and, generally, in “female-dominated” occupations. These tend to be “dominated” by women only on their lower to middle ranks. Challenging this discourse to progressive ends involves uncovering how “different” is often a euphemism for unequal, or superior/inferior, and how women’s overrepresentation in devalued work is the other side of the coin which is gender inequality:

I would put money on the fact that all of these roles are paid much less than the roles that have more men in them [...] We can talk all day over whether or not it's natural for women to have a certain kind of work.. but it's not natural for it to be worthless.. and it doesn't make sense that these jobs are all the lowest paid jobs at the university... even if we put arguments aside for a second.. and say we do have a specifically female skill-set.. there's no reason why that's worth less money... and.. why we can't be in charge of things with that skill-set (Nikki, FG7)

It is therefore not sufficient to contest the devaluation of university admin work and/or its construction as women’s work: in order to promote discursive change, their interplay – the gendered devaluation of university admin work – should equally be challenged.

Contesting the gendered devaluation of university admin work and the gendered “them and us” HE culture

Nikki’s quote above is an instance where the gendered devaluation of university admin, and its related financial devaluation, is contested. Another example is provided by Beck’s quote:

There's a bit of a typing pool.. kind of stereotype you know... that women do admin at a lower grade.. basically.. secretaries.. and are sometimes treated as such.. that they're doing that because that's the kind of work that women do alongside their family life or whatever.. -- I don't think that's particularly true at CSU... I think in general... [...] that's still hanging over.. that still exists (Beck, FG6)

The discursive construction of women as more capable to cope with boring work and angry customers, as willing to be deferential and subservient, as lacking ambition and confidence, and being ‘happy to just do admin’ (Samya, FG2) are other expressions

of the gendered devaluation of university admin work which should be challenged to promote discursive change.

Crucially, contesting the gendered devaluation of university admin work entails revaluing the work, but not *in order* to get more men to do it. Rather, it should be part of a broader project of discursive intervention aimed at undermining a series of underlying gendered assumptions at the basis of such gendered devaluation: for example, the assumption that women, and in particular women-as-mothers, are over-represented in university admin because they need work which is (constructed as) easier and less 'stressful' (M11).

This study argued that the gendered devaluation of university admin work works to sustain a gendered "them and us" divide in HE(A). Change to the latter can thus only be stimulated by contesting the former. Episodes of gender-differential treatment told by participants are, arguably, expressions of academia's 'endemic, institutionalised base of sexism, racism, class snobbery and intellectual elitism' (Atkinson, 2001: 1)⁵⁹. Telling such episodes could thus have potentially emancipatory effects. This potential is, however, diminished by the consistent failure to explicitly *name* and make sense of these episodes as manifestations of inequality/discrimination. These anecdotes instead tend to be individualised as isolated, one-off episodes (also cf. Gill et al, 2017) involving 'older chaps', 'individuals being idiots', 'bad eggs' which have slipped 'through the net' (M13) of family/female-friendly, egalitarian, meritocratic HEA.

Promoting discursive change thus first of all entails *naming* and making sense of the typing pool stereotype as one expression of persistent gender inequality in HEA. The gendered devaluation of university admin should be contested in order to expose, disrupt and eventually undermine the ideological discursive network, or interplaying discursive barriers, it sustains: namely, HEA's discursive construction as a family/female-friendly, meritocratic, egalitarian employment sector, where gender is (said to be) irrelevant.

Contesting the discursive construction of all women in HEA as mothers, and of motherhood and childcare as 'the issue' in supposedly family/female-friendly HEA

When accounting for women's relative overrepresentation in admin roles, participants consistently constructed HEA as family-friendly and *therefore* as female-friendly. This account was produced by making a regular rhetorical move: answering about mothers

⁵⁹ Although episodes of race-based differential treatment were not *told* by participants, this does not mean that racism does not exist in UK HE: for a discussion of lived experiences of BAME staff in UK HE, cf. ECU, 2009 and 2011a.

instead of women, or put differently, constructing all women in HEA as mothers. Participants also simultaneously drew on the typing pool stereotype. Universities, they argued, provide women-as-mothers with easy, mundane non-stressful admin work which can be done flexibly and therefore easily juggled alongside family commitments.

When asked to account for women's relative under-representation in (senior) management roles, participants regularly explained that away too as the side effect of motherhood and childcare, thus constructing motherhood and childcare as *the* issue in family-friendly HEA. HEA's construction as family/female-friendly was not, however, contested in this account. This apparent contradiction, or ideological dilemma, was negotiated by legitimising the vertical gender imbalance as the inevitable side-effect not only of motherhood but also of meritocracy. This was achieved by constructing flexible working as simultaneously only required by women-as-mothers and unsuitable for higher-grade jobs; and by constructing women-as-mothers as necessarily and inevitably less able to work full-time and for uninterrupted periods of time, and therefore unable to acquire the experience required to progress.

It was thus argued that, far from being contradictory or paradoxical, participants' tendency to construct HEA as family/female-friendly and to construct motherhood and childcare as *the* (natural and inevitable) issue in HEA interplay to ideological effects, closing down opportunities for change. Constructing motherhood and childcare as *the* issue afforded participants a way out of discussing any other determinants of gender inequality, in turn reinforcing HEA's construction as female-friendly.

There were some instances in the data sets where participants disrupted either the construction of HEA as family-friendly or as female-friendly. For example, M2 told of a colleague (in a HEI other than CSU), whose job was reassigned while she was on maternity leave, who had to 'barter' to be able to come back to work part-time (cf. Chapter 11). Participants telling episodes of gender-differential treatment also, though often indirectly, challenged HEA's construction as female-friendly (cf. 9.3). A few participants (cf. 10.2; 11.2) also contested the alleged flexibility of lower-level admin roles (e.g. M4), argued for more flexibility on higher grades (e.g. L5), and claimed that flexibility would benefit all staff, not just women-as-mothers (e.g. M3).

It is argued here that what should be contested is not simply the construction of HEA as a flexible, family-friendly or female-friendly employer. Rather, it is the way in which these constructions interplay in mutually supportive ways, i.e. the discursive network they operate in, which ought to be disrupted – as it provided participants with a way out of discussing gender inequality/discrimination in HEA. This would entail

contesting the afore-mentioned typing pool stereotype (i.e. the assumption that women-as-mothers are only able to cope with easy, mundane and “non-vital” admin work) as one expression of gender inequality in HEA. It should go hand in hand with challenging the widespread tendency to construct all women in HEA as mothers (an assumption which is not supported by CSU data, cf. 10.2) and motherhood and childcare as *the* issue in HEA:

you can't explain all away with.. motherhood [...] there's gotta be some sort of... bias whether it's conscious or unconscious... in the hiring process in the recruiting process.. in the way jobs are structured (L6)

L6 does not explicitly name gender inequality/discrimination, but uses the word ‘bias’, and points out how this operates not only in the recruitment process, but also ‘in the way jobs are structured’. Carefully phrased though it might be, this quote thus also challenges HEA’s discursive construction as egalitarian and meritocratic.

Contesting the discursive construction of HEA as already meritocratic

Constructing HEA as a meritocratic sector legitimises the imbalance as the result of objective recruitment and promotion decisions, i.e. as the way things should be. This study discussed this as a palatable way to express sexism – the assumption that the gender imbalance only exists because women do not work hard enough. Within this patterned account, gender inequality and discrimination were disavowed, women were indirectly blamed for the gender imbalance, and encouraged to work on themselves, their confidence, ambition, networking and negotiating skills (cf. 9.2; 10.3).

The discursive construction of HEA as meritocratic was contested by relatively few participants:

I always think that you should have the best person for the job!... (1) and I do believe that women are as good as men.. and I don't think they're that different either.. I mean there's little.. things but I think.. in the nature of university administration management.. there is nothing that makes it.. you know female or male.. characteristics more or less... suitable a job so... I don't see why it should.. -- why this situation is necessary... it should be more equal (M4)

I think it should be equal.. everywhere! I don't buy into [*inaudible*] that you can do certain things better than men and viceversa.. and you can learn (Amala, FG2)

Using a discourse of meritocracy to emancipatory rather than ideological effects entails drawing on it to contest, rather than legitimise, the gender-imbalanced/unequal status quo. As the two quotes above suggest, this also involves challenging the gender differences discourse, whereby women and men are constructed as

(stereo)typically different and good at different (and hierarchically positioned) types of work. Put differently, challenging the construction of gender-imbalanced HEA as meritocratic entails contesting its construction as an already egalitarian employment sector, where gender is irrelevant and gender inequality does not exist.

Contesting HE(A)'s discursive construction as an egalitarian employment sector, where gender is irrelevant

Participants regularly denied the relevance of gender in gender-imbalanced HEA. This study discussed the paradoxical construction of gender-imbalanced HEA as egalitarian as an element of a postfeminist sensibility (cf. Gill et al, 2017), which in turn made gender inequality/discrimination 'unspeakable' (Gill, 2014). Instances where participants contested this construction by explicitly *naming* or hinting at inequality or potential discrimination were thus few and far between, and very carefully phrased:

If there was a level playground... and everyone got the opportunity to try everything.. [...] without having this stereotype I think that [*i.e. the gender imbalance*] would look different (Efié, FG7)

The ability to recruit accordingly... has to be fairly strong in order for the right people to be in the right place regardless of their gender and that's what I feel... doesn't necessarily get done... adequately.. and then I think... the whole... gender thing falls into place.. I think then they're male can they do the job.. and it's not because they're a man they can do it.. it's because they have the ability.. and the female.. equally can do it (Amala, FG2)

In order to promote discursive change, the widespread tendency to deny the relevance of gender in gender-imbalanced HEA should be explicitly contested. The patterned elements of a postfeminist sensibility critiqued by Gill and colleagues (2017) and similarly traced in this study's data sets (cf. 10.1) should also be challenged before gender inequality/discrimination in HEA becomes completely unspeakable. *Naming* gender inequality and identifying it as being "right here", "right now" is thus, as previously argued, the first step or action for discursive change.

The implications of positionality on access, production and subversive potential of counter-discourses

As previously noted (cf. e.g. 11.2.3), the capacity to contest discursive barriers and produce counter-discourses is arguably influenced, i.e. enabled and/or constrained, by positionality. The term positionality is here used to refer to the differential access to discourses and accounts afforded by an individual's or group's situated position with regards to not only gender, ethnicity, age etc., but also to status or position. For

example, due to their position as former CSU employees, leavers appeared less constrained by institutional discourse, and had thus access to more critical accounts of CSU than current CSU managers. Of those female employees telling episodes of gender-differential treatment (cf. 9.3), only a very few (e.g. M7) appeared able and willing to speak of these experiences in terms suggestive of gender inequality.

Positionality does not merely facilitate or constrain access, i.e. what 'can be said' (Willig, 2011: 111). If not all counter-discourses are readily accessible to all HEA workers, their subversive potential is also diminished. The emancipatory potential of any given counter-discourse also depends on who produces it within an institutional context, and how they are positioned: only those voices that are institutionally louder than others will eventually be heard. For example, the devaluation of university admin work was contested by administrators taking part in Tong's (2014) as well as this study, and writing blogs and articles (e.g. Butler, 2014; Pearson, 2008). The potentially emancipatory effects of this counter-discourse cannot, however, be fully realised until other HE staff, e.g. (senior) managers and academics, start co-producing it more consistently and openly.

Careful consideration should thus be given to how the counter-discourses highlighted in this sub-section, i.e. those instances where participants contested discursive barriers to change, can be made available to a wider range of HEA workers. This study engaged with female and male CSU administrators, (senior) managers and leavers in order to explore a wider range of available accounts; future research should involve more HE staff groups and explore the potential of different groups to produce counter-discourses (cf. 12.3.3). Further engagement is recommended with organisations that operate against the constraints of institutional and sectorial discourse and practice, e.g. the Equality Challenge Unit (whose overall aim is to *challenge* the sector), UNISON and the University and College Union (UCU), in order to make counter-discourses more audible, available and, ultimately, reproducible in HE(A).

The next sub-section looks at how, by engaging in a range of research-related activities while conducting this study, I have endeavoured – albeit within the constraints of my own positionality – to widen access to counter-discourses and promote discursive change.

12.2.2. On promoting discursive change: actions and reflections

As Sunderland argues, intervention in discourse 'can be done in private as well as public talk' and 'as part of the normal course of events' (2004: 207; 204). As a former

university administrator studying for a PhD, the vast majority of people I speak to on a day-to-day basis work or study at UK universities. I have thus been in a privileged position to contest damaging discourses through intentional non-use and by (non-) confrontationally using counter-discourses, both in public and in private. In this section, I outline and reflect upon the research-related activities I have undertaken to further this study's impact and utility agenda (cf. 12.3).

Studying an HE-related topic puts researchers in a privileged position to disseminate their work within their own field of study. By presenting at several national and international conferences, and writing a paper for publication in a UK-based journal, I have had the opportunity to stimulate within-sector conversations about the under-researched 'forgotten workforce' (Castleman and Allen, 1995; Tong, 2014) of HE. I plan to continue these dissemination activities, not only through publications, but also by (confidentially) sharing research recommendations (cf. 12.2.1) with CSU's Equality Committee, UCU and UNISON branches, and the Equality Challenge Unit's Athena SWAN Team (cf. below).

While conducting this study, I became an active member of my university's Gender Equality team and my School's Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team. I argued in favour of applying for an award under the expanded Athena SWAN criteria, including PS staff. I also (briefly) led on School PS data analysis and subsequently worked as a consultant advising on and drafting the application. My involvement in these activities was informed by this study's insights, and in turn gave me an opportunity to reflect on their practical implications, for example in terms of how they could be translated into data analysis-based actions to be included in Athena SWAN action plans.

In 2016/17, I also worked as an Equality Charters Adviser (Athena SWAN) at the Equality Challenge Unit for eight months. Engaging with Athena SWAN work at local and national level offered me invaluable opportunities to promote discursive change. In my role at ECU, intervention in discourse took the form of, for example, contributing to the revision of the PSS-related sections of the Athena SWAN handbook, and drafting and delivering advice and training on how to include PS staff in institutional and departmental Athena SWAN award applications. (Non-) confrontational use of non-damaging discourses also took place privately, for instance during meetings with/after presentations to UK HE staff. This was a challenging experience, as at times I had to deal with substantial resistance, including strong denial of the existence of gender inequality in the sector, and especially in allegedly female-dominated administration, and the tendency to draw on damaging discourses such as the devaluation of university admin. The afore-mentioned

resistance and denial, however, also provided a sounding board for this study's "results", and therefore an even stronger rationale for promoting discursive change. Encouragingly, through my role at ECU I had the opportunity to speak with HE staff who were already actively contesting some of the discursive barriers to change critiqued in this study.

My experience as an Athena SWAN Adviser also informed the analysis provided in Chapter 11. Participants' suggestions and patterned ways of talking about initiatives to change the gender imbalance were analysed and organised into two broad areas: acting at key career transition points (KCTPs: recruitment and promotion, cf. 11.2.1) and acting to change the "culture" (cf. 11.2.2). These are the two broad areas in which Athena SWAN applications require institutions and departments to advance gender equality. Some participants (e.g. M7; L1; cf. 11.2.3) argued in favour of taking a holistic, systematic, embedded approach to change, which should encompass acting on KCTPs, cultural, and policy/practice-based levels. It was argued that this is, broadly speaking, the approach promoted by the Athena SWAN Charter.

Further engagement with Athena SWAN is a recommendation that this study makes not only to CSU, but to the sector at large. Although Athena SWAN is certainly not *the only* way to effect change, or a panacea which will solve all of the sector's gender inequality issues, it has proved to be an effective tool and catalyst for change (ECU 2011b & 2014d). Due to its recent expansion to include PS staff (as well as considerations of intersectionality and trans students and staff), Athena SWAN challenges the (gendered) "them and us divide" in HE, and has thus the potential to dedicate more attention to PS staff in the future. Furthermore, as award applications are assessed by the academic community (including PS staff), and due to its being a progressive charter, it pushes the sector to raise its standards.

In addition to its benefits and impact, Athena SWAN's perceived drawbacks are well documented (Caffrey et al., 2016; Maudsley Debate, 2016; Ovseiko et al. 2017). Criticism of Athena SWAN tends to be about the amount of work it requires, which often falls disproportionately on female staff, and the box-ticking approach of tokenistic compliance that some departments and institutions may be adopting in order to "get the badge" (especially as holding an Athena SWAN award might soon become a pre-requisite for Research Council funding, and it already is for NHRC funding). Rather than being caused by Athena SWAN itself, these drawbacks are arguably symptomatic of deeper cultural, gender inequality-related issues in HE.

It is argued that taking the holistic, embedded approach to gender equality work promoted by the Athena SWAN Charter could be a way to enable discursive

change as well as material change beyond the discursive. Athena SWAN explicitly requires institutions and departments to commit to ‘advancing gender equality in HE’, ‘removing the obstacles faced by women, in particular, at major points of career development and progression’, ‘addressing unequal gender representation across academic disciplines and professional and support functions’, and to ‘acknowledge that advancing gender equality demands commitment and action from all levels of the organisation, and in particular active leadership from those in senior roles’ (ECU, 2017). In doing so, it *names* and acknowledges the existence of structural gender inequality in HE: its most meaningful contribution may therefore be to discursive change in the sector.

In the near future, there are plans to collaborate with ECU’s Athena SWAN Team to build on the Charter’s potential to promote discursive change in the sector, for example by co-producing and co-delivering a webinar on PS staff also based on this study’s insights. As the webinar would be widely advertised, (free) and open to all staff at all UK institutions engaged in Athena SWAN work, it would provide an invaluable opportunity to further promote counter-discourses and discursive change in UK HE(A).

12.3. Contributions, limitations and further research

12.3.1. Research contributions

Among their criteria to evaluate qualitative/DA research, Tracy (1995) and Yardley (2000) include impact and utility or ‘fruitfulness’ (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Research can contribute to the literature/theory, to methodology/methodological literature, and/or have practical and/or socio-cultural implications (e.g. for communities or policy makers; Yardley, 2000: 219).

This study contributed, partly and to varying degrees, to all these three areas. Its socio-cultural/practical implications were outlined in 12.2. Through dissemination and my engagement in a range of activities within the sector, this study has made some contribution to discursive practice. To further this study’s practical impact/utility agenda, research recommendations for discursive change will be fed to CSU’s Equality Committee, UNISON and UCU branches, ECU, and the sector via ECU (e.g. the webinar on PS staff).

This research also made contributions to the literature, by building on – at times supporting and developing, other times contesting – insights from the limited scholarship available on university PS staff, and administrative and secretarial occupations in particular. It critiqued the recent “rebadging exercises” that *some* PS

staff have carried out to distance themselves from the labels administrator and administration as originating from the sectorial devaluation of admin work. It thus argued that the well-documented “them and us” divide in HE characterises not only academic/“non-academic” staff relations, but also relations within the PS staff category.

Devaluation and the “them and us” divide were indeed two of the four main themes (the other two being “women’s work” and lack of progression) consistently flagged up by the handful of studies so far dedicated to HE’s “forgotten” admin workers. These four themes were confirmed as salient as a result of a thematic analysis of this study’s data sets, and were further explored through discourse analysis. Previous research had also highlighted the static situation of HE administrative and secretarial workers for the past 30 years, and sought to investigate the paradoxical ‘degree of segregation that remains in the face of the sector’s gender equity initiatives’ (Strachan et al. 2013: 217).

By adopting a critical realist discursive approach, the present study has moved beyond confirming previous research insights. It has deepened our understanding of the afore-mentioned four themes, of the paradoxical persistence of the gender imbalance in supposedly female/family-friendly, meritocratic and egalitarian HEA, and of discursive barriers to change in the gender-imbalanced status quo, as summarised in the rest of this section.

“Women’s work”

Previous studies (e.g. Eveline, 2004) had tended to consider HE administrative and secretarial work as work predominantly or exclusively done by women, rarely if ever taking into account men in these roles (though cf. Tong, 2014). This study went beyond *describing* university admin as “women’s work”, and explored how it is discursively feminised, i.e. how women are constructed as (stereo)typically better and more suited to it. Crucially, university admin work and workers were discursively feminised in the data sets only once participants had been prompted to talk about gendered work and to account for the gender imbalance. Their patterned accounts either legitimised the horizontal gender imbalance as merit-based, or contested its legitimacy. When contested, the predominance of women in these roles was either accounted for as the result of positive discrimination in favour of women (an account which was critiqued as working to ideological effects) or as linked to the devaluation, including financial, of admin work. Constructed as “not good enough” or “too good”, men were discursively pushed out of these jobs.

A key contribution of this study is, in other words, that it considered the feminisation of university admin as an account, a discursive process, a “doing”, rather than taking it for granted as common sense. By deconstructing how it is “done”, or articulated, in discourse, this study also illustrated how it can be “undone” in and through discourse (cf. 12.2.1).

Devaluation

Similarly, the devaluation of university admin work as ‘routine clerical tasks’ (Whitchurch, 2004a: 282) and ‘secretarial dross’ (Allen-Collinson, 2007: 302) was explored as a discursive construction: its taken-for-grantedness was questioned, and its far-reaching detrimental effects were critiqued. The study also contributed to the literature by illustrating how the devaluation of admin work was discursively gendered when participants accounted for the gender imbalance. It argued that such gendered devaluation of university admin has so far worked as a discursive barrier, resulting in a lack of interest in and action to change the gender imbalance in these roles. Instances where participants contested the devaluation and gendered devaluation of university admin work were thus highlighted in order to promote discursive change and open up opportunities for action.

The “them and us” divide

Participants established several “them and us” oppositions. FG participants in particular made sense of what L3 calls the ‘fissure’ with senior management and academic staff as being based on the (gendered) devaluation of admin work and its subordinate position to the academic/management core of HE. This study also illustrated how several of the “them and us” oppositions initially introduced as gender-neutral were reframed as gendered when participants were asked to account for the gender imbalance. For example, the binary good/bad administrator was consistently gendered to account for the over-representation of women in (devalued) admin roles; the administrator/academic and administrator/manager oppositions were regularly mapped onto the female/male and women’s work/men’s work binaries.

The “them and us” divide in HE is well documented in the literature (e.g. Conway & Dobson, 2000; Dobson, 2003; Krug, 2015) as a status-based divide between academics and “non-academics”. Some scholars (e.g. Dobson, 2003) have not simply ignored, but also strongly denied the gendered dimension of this divide. This study argued that the “them and us” divide in HE is not only co-constructed between academics and “non-academics” (both in the data sets and in previous scholarship), but also within the PS staff group. Most importantly, it illustrated how

the “them and us” divide and oppositions were constructed at the intersection of status- and gender-based disadvantage – in other words, on the basis of the *gendered* devaluation of university admin.

(Lack of) Progression in (neoliberal) HEA

This study also contributed to sectorial discussions about (lack of) progression in HEA. It did so by analysing situated accounts of those who have and have not progressed in the sector (cf. Chapter 7). FG participants provided a consistent account: their lack of progression was made sense of as the result of structural issues, external competition and the devaluation of admin work (in line with, e.g. Tong, 2014).

Managers’ competing accounts, and in particular their co-construction of (lack of) progression as the result of (lack of) individual entrepreneurship, were also explored. Partial insights were thus provided into the ‘psychic life’ of neoliberalism (Scharff, 2016) as it is lived out by workers other than academics in the entrepreneurial university – insights which future research could explore further (cf. 12.3.3). Managers discursively constructed the ideal neoliberal HEA worker not only as entrepreneurial, mobile and able/willing to work long hours, but also as someone who ought to ‘rein it in’, ‘keep [their] mouth shut’ and not moan, be ‘too negative’ or ‘too vocal’ in order to progress (e.g. M12, cf. 7.2).

Managers’ tendency to construct themselves as ideal neoliberal HE(A) workers when talking about their own career progression was discussed as constraining, or at least limiting, their potential to produce counter-discourses which could challenge the institutional status-quo. Only a few participants, notably leavers and M7 (cf. 12.2.1), appeared able and willing to produce more critical accounts in relation to, for example, the gender imbalance at CSU.

(Lack of) Progression and the vertical gender imbalance

This study illustrated how lack of progression was regularly reframed as a “gender issue”, i.e. as affecting mainly women, when accounting for the vertical gender imbalance. When talking about progression to senior roles and the gender imbalance in senior management, participants consistently co-produced what was defined as the “external competition” account (cf. 9.2.3). This was interpreted as competing with the “glass escalator” account, and as having been made available in the entrepreneurial university as a result of ‘the colonisation [also discursive] of academia by the market’ (Mautner, 2005: 95, cf. 2.2).

In a way, this study thus partly answered Williams’ call for new concepts to ‘understand workplace gender inequality [...] in our neoliberal era’ (2013: 609). The “external competition” account was not, however, considered as a new “concept” or

explanation. Rather, in line with this study's discursive approach, it was interpreted as an account, and as such as sometimes drawn upon to ideological effects. External competition from the private sector was consistently mentioned to account not only for G5 managers' lack of internal progression, but also for the gender imbalance in top roles. The latter was constructed as being *brought into*, rather than being endemic to, HEA – as instead implied by the “glass escalator” account. The “external competition” account is thus one of the ways in which participants were able to repudiate the existence of gender inequality/discrimination within HEA – a way afforded by, and critiqued as an element of, a postfeminist sensibility in neoliberal HE(A).

Elements of a postfeminist sensibility: discursive barriers to action and change in gender-imbalanced HEA.

This study added to our understanding of the paradoxical ‘degree of segregation that remains in the face of the sector's gender equity initiatives’ (Strachan et al. 2013: 217). It did so by identifying discursive barriers to action and change in patterned elements of a postfeminist sensibility also traced by Gill and colleagues (2017) in their workplace research. These elements included participants' tendency to distance themselves from the gender imbalance by constructing it as being (worse) elsewhere (e.g. in other departments, institutions and sectors), not representative of their own experience, and/or a residual element of past gender inequality. Participants' tendency to explain all away with motherhood and childcare in allegedly family/female-friendly HEA, to legitimise the imbalance as the result of objective meritocracy, and to deny that gender may matter in supposedly egalitarian, but gender-imbalanced, HEA were also interpreted as features of a postfeminist sensibility.

This study's input to HE(A) literature in this area thus lies in its deconstruction and critique of HE(A)'s ‘rhetoric of collegiality’ (Eveline, 2004: 137) and equality as providing a network of interplaying discursive barriers to action and change. The discursive construction of HEA as female/family-friendly, egalitarian, and meritocratic was interpreted as a ‘cover of equality’ (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998: 803), drawn upon in ways which end up sustaining the gender-imbalanced status quo and diminish the rationale for action and change. As it provided participants with many a way out of arguing for action and change, HE(A)'s rhetoric of equality and meritocracy was interpreted as ‘part of the very mechanism though which inequality is, in fact, reproduced’ (Gill, 2014: 523); put differently, as part of what has ‘allowed universities to continue in such a [gender-unequal] way’ (Castleman & Allen: 1995: 69).

Moving beyond deconstruction towards reconstruction

Deconstructing and critiquing HE(A)'s 'cover of equality' (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998: 803) is a contribution this study was able to make through its critical realist discursive approach to the data, and by engaging with scholarship taking a similar approach to the study of 'unequal egalitarianism' (Wetherell et al., 1987: 59) and a postfeminist sensibility at work (e.g. Gill et al, 2017).

Ultimately, this study's socio-cultural/practical contributions also have implications for the literature. By promoting examples from the data sets where participants contested dominant gendered discourses and discursive barriers to change, this study has taken a much-needed first step beyond deconstruction and critique, towards discursive reconstruction. New directions for research on gender inequality in HE(A), it is argued in 12.3.3, should be focused on 'talk[ing change] into' and, most of all, 'action[ing it] into, acceptability' (Sunderland, 2004: 214).

Using corpus techniques to explore institutional discourse

This study also made a contribution to methodology through its use of corpus linguistics tools and techniques to explore a snapshot of institutional discourse (cf. Appendix C). The results of the corpus-based analysis of CSU job descriptions (cf. Appendix C.iii) were partial and provisional due to its small-scale, exploratory nature. Nonetheless, the study's methodological contribution lies in its use of some of the preliminary results from the corpus-based analysis to clarify terminology, participant recruitment target groups, and data collection design, and to produce material for participants to engage with. FG participants were provided with a sample G4 job description, produced as an output of the corpus-based study (cf. Table 2, p. 75 and Appendix C.iv), and were thus able to interact with and provide situated responses to a sample of institutional discourse. This approach could be developed by further research interested in exploring interpretations of and situated responses to institutional discourses on a range of topics.

12.3.2. Limitations

This study has, of course, limitations. As it focused on one institution, I was particularly careful not to make broad generalisations: exploring local discourses implies that any "results" will inevitably be partial and situated. Nevertheless, previous scholarship, rigorous analysis and my engagement with the sector at local and national level provide support to this study's "results" and their broader relevance for

the sector. Further research (cf. 12.3.3) could in turn uphold, develop, and move beyond these: for example, by focusing on multiple case studies; employing ethnographic methods to capture “mundane”, everyday expressions of academia’s ‘endemic, institutionalised base of sexism, racism, class snobbery and intellectual elitism’ (Atkinson, 2001: 1; cf. 12.3.3); and further exploring constructions and/or situated re-interpretations of institutional discourse.

Given the scope, resource and word-limit constraints of PhD projects/theses, this study had to be narrowed down and focused on a particular aspect of the topic at hand. As previously noted, more attention could have been dedicated to the intersections of gender with other characteristics. No generalisations were made on the basis of participants’ ethnicities or backgrounds, and as previously discussed (cf. Chapter 4), the relative scarcity of talk about race and racism, and their intersections with gender and sexism, is a silence of this research which future research could more explicitly address. Along with status, age was an axis of disadvantage that participants talked about more in detail in its intersection with gender (e.g. 9.1.2, p.183; 10.4, p.231). While Tong (2014) defines the disadvantages faced by the HE administrative and secretarial workforce as gender- and class-based, in this study status was not interpreted as necessarily synonymous with class. Future research could investigate this further.

The data sets were also incredibly rich, and the analysis had to be focused in order to develop a coherent argument. I made a decision to treat the FG data set as the main data set and the interview data set as a supplementary data set (for reasons outlined in 4.2.3, and mainly to do with this study’s interest in dynamic discursive co-construction in relation to the research questions). This is not a limitation in itself, but only in that it meant that the interview data set was analysed as a supplementary source of data, i.e. in relation to the research foci / overarching themes co-constructed in the FG data set, hence partially (cf. 5.1-5.4). For example, managers’ narratives of career trajectories and their identity constructions as administrators, managers and/or leaders were not explored in depth, as they were beyond this study’s research foci. G4-G7 interviewees were also considered as one group of managers, but could have been sub-divided into at least two groups. A higher number of senior managers, including those “parachuted into” HEA, could have been involved in the study.

12.3.3. Further research

As with any study on relatively under-researched topics or populations, there are several avenues for further research. Future studies could address the aforementioned limitations, for example exploring how respondents may articulate (or

not) intersectional disadvantage. Other gender-imbalanced PS occupations (e.g. support roles such as Cleaning and Security, or professional roles such as IT and Finance) could be researched. Institutional discourse could be the focus of further investigation via corpus linguistics or other methods. Future studies on the 'psychic life' of neoliberalism (Scharff, 2016) as it is lived out in the entrepreneurial university should include workers other than academics and be sensitive to commonalities and differences between groups.

Most importantly, additional (discursive) research should, in my view, move beyond critique towards intervention, beyond deconstruction towards reconstruction. In light of the discussion on the implications of positionality in terms of access to and subversive potential of counter-discourses (cf. 12.2.1), across-group participatory action research (e.g. McIntyre, 2008) would be particularly suitable for these reconstruction/rediscursivisation aims. This could be carried out in collaboration with academic and professional staff (e.g. administrators, managers, Equality & Diversity teams), in turn contributing to challenging the "them and us" divide, making counter-discourses available to a wider range of HE workers, and further promoting their emancipatory potential.

In particular, there is scope to promote discursive change in the form of 'facilitated group discursual intervention' and 'rediscursivisation' activities (Sunderland, 2004: 203; cf. 12.2). Further research could, for instance, aim to:

- 'change the way we pitch' (M7) university admin roles by cooperating with Human Resources, temp agencies / graduate careers services and graduate programmes such as *Ambitious Futures*;
- pilot and evaluate anonymised application procedures;
- research and produce case studies (e.g. flexible working, parental leave and/or career progression from administrative and secretarial occupations/grades) and toolkits for practitioners, promoting the use of counter-discourses and accounts (cf. 12.2.1);
- involve administrators and middle/senior managers who have progressed within the sector or have been "parachuted into" HEA; involve academic staff;
- collaborate with the Association of University Administrators (AUA) to explore the possibility to establish and evaluate a (national/local) professional development framework;
- collaborate with UNISON and the University and College Union (UCU) to promote counter-discourses to a wider range of HEA workers.

There is also scope for further collaborations with the Equality Challenge Unit and its expanded Athena SWAN Charter.

In brief, future research aiming to promote discursive (and material) change could, and *should*, help move beyond 'awareness raising' to 'use of that new [discursive] awareness' (Sunderland, 2004: 215, citing Cameron, 1998) in HE(A).

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Appendices

Appendix A: A detailed analysis of PSS data by gender, level of seniority and/or occupational group.

As mentioned in 1.1, a closer look at data by gender, level of seniority and occupational groups shows that the PS staff profile is characterised by vertical (across levels) and horizontal (across occupations) gender imbalance. A detailed analysis of these data is provided here, starting with the vertical gender imbalance. Table 9 shows all PS staff by gender and contract level (i.e. level of seniority), from highest (Head of Institution, HoI) to lowest (XpertHR level P). Since, taken together, the top 12 levels out of 20 (HoI to UCEA level 5b) account for only 2.7% of all PS staff (2.1% of female PSS and 4.1% of male PSS), they have been merged, and percentage ranges are given.

PSS	Female		Male		All Staff		
	↓ %	→ %	↓ %	→ %	↓ %	→ %	No.
Hol & UCEA levels 2a-5b	2.1	Ranging from 24.1 to 51.9	4.1	Ranging from 48.1 to 75.9	2.7	100	5750
XpertHR level I	2.2	50.6	3.6	49.4	2.7	100	5555
XpertHR level J	7.6	53.8	11.0	46.2	8.9	100	18230
XpertHR level K	13.5	58.1	16.3	41.9	14.5	100	29865
XpertHR level L	17.3	62.9	17.2	37.1	17.3	100	35465
XpertHR level M	23.1	70.7	16.1	29.3	20.5	100	42075
XpertHR level N	16.6	67.4	13.5	32.6	15.5	100	31770
XpertHR level O	7.6	56.8	9.7	43.2	8.4	100	17295
XpertHR level P	10.0	66.3	8.6	33.7	9.5	100	19500
Total	100	62.7	100	37.3	100	100	205505

Table 9: UK PSS by gender and contract level in 2014/15 (Adapted from ECU, 2016: 210).
 ↓ % indicates that percentages should be read vertically, e.g. the percentage of female PSS who are on that contract level out of the total female staff population; → % indicates that percentages should be read horizontally, e.g. the percentage of PSS on that contract level who are female.

Men are relatively over-represented on all contract levels higher than L (and on level O, where several campus services, e.g. security, and manual roles can be found). Furthermore, a higher proportion of men than women work on all levels higher than L (in total, 35% male PSS vs. 25.4% female PSS). Levels M and N can be defined as female-dominated, not only because women are relatively over-represented (70.7%

and 67.4% respectively), but also because almost 40% of all female PSS are employed on these two levels (vs. less than 30% of men).

As previously noted, the PSS profile is also characterised by a stark horizontal gender imbalance, with women concentrated in specific occupations. In 2013, HESA used the standard occupational classification (SOC), dividing PSS into 13 occupations. From 2014 onwards, HESA has used the SOC2010 variant, distributing PSS over nine occupational sub-groups. This makes pre-2014 data not straightforwardly comparable. Despite this, horizontal segregation can be easily noticed, regardless of whether SOC or SOC2010 is used. Tables 10 and 11 only report on occupations that were female-dominated (i.e. at least 70% female)⁶⁰ in 2011/12 (ECU, 2013) and 2014/15 (ECU, 2016):

SOC	Female	Male	All staff	
	%	%	Total %	No.
Student welfare workers, careers advisors, personnel and planning officers	74.0	26.0	100	11130
Library assistants, clerks and general administrative assistants	78.5	21.5	100	54450
Secretaries, typists, receptionist and telephonists	90.7	9.3	100	14475
Retail and customer service occupations	74.0	26.0	100	1255
Total PSS	62.3	37.7	100	196860

Table 10. PSS by occupational group and gender in 2011/12. Adapted from ECU, 2013: 42.

SOC2010	Female		Male		All staff		No.
	↓ %	→ %	↓ %	→ %	↓ %	→ %	
SOC 4 Administrative & secretarial	42.7	81.4	16.4	18.6	32.9	100	67595
SOC 7 Sales & customer service occupations	1.2	69.1	0.9	30.9	1.0	100	2145
Total PSS	100	62.7	100	37.3	100	100	205505

Table 11. PSS by occupational group and gender in 2014/15. Adapted from ECU, 2016: 212.

⁶⁰ A measure of occupational segregation (Jacobs, 1993).

Using the SOC2010 variant, only one out of nine sets of PS occupations are sex-segregated: SOC4, 'administrative and secretarial' (81.4% female). Although occupations defined as 'sales and customer service' were close to being segregated, both 2014/15 and 2011/12 data show that few staff work in these. Table 11 (cf. p.305) also indicates that 42.7% (i.e. almost one in two) of all female PSS work in administrative and secretarial occupations, whereas only 16.4% (up from 15.9% in 2012/13) of male PSS do. As Table 11 shows, this female-dominated set of occupations makes up for one third of all PSS, and is thus the biggest "non-academic" sub-group. Considered together, the data presented in this section suggest that vertical and horizontal gender imbalances in the PSS profile are interlinked: the administrative and secretarial occupations women are concentrated in are located on lower contract levels, especially levels M and N (and partly level L).

The data discussed so far include full-time and part-time workers. Part-time work is mostly done by female PSS: in 2014/15, 40.9% of female PSS worked part-time, and part-time workers were 79.9% female (ECU, 2016: 204). Part-time working does not, however, have a significant impact on the administrative and secretarial staff gender profile. When part-time workers are considered separately, the percentage of women in administrative and secretarial occupations does indeed increase (88.1% vs. 81.4%). However, the proportion of part-time female PSS working in these roles is lower (39.9%) than when all modes (42.7%) or full-time workers only (44.6%) are considered (ECU, 2016: 212-216). This is due to a combination of two factors. Firstly, a significantly lower percentage of men work in these roles on a part-time basis (only 11.9% vs. 22.3% on a full-time basis, ECU, 2016: 214). Secondly, a substantially high proportion of part-time female PSS work in so-called 'elementary occupations' (likely to be cleaning and catering jobs – 22.9% vs. only 2.9% on a full-time basis, ECU, 2016: 212-216).

As should be expected, horizontal and vertical gender imbalances (as well as part-time working) lead to gender pay differences. Section 1.1. briefly reflects on HESA data on staff salary ranges by gender and mode of working (not reported here, cf. ECU2016: 226).

Appendix B: CSU grades as they map onto the national spine points

Note: Grades have been re-numbered not to identify CSU. Grade 7 is off the scale.

CSU Grade	Spine point
Grade 6	51
	50
	49
	48
	47
Grade 5	46
	45
	44
	43
	42
	41
	40
Grade 4	39
	38
	37
	36
	35
	34
Grade 3	33
	32
	31
	30
	29
	28
	27
	26
Grade 2	25
	24
	23
	22
	21

Appendix C: The exploratory corpus-based study

The exploratory corpus-based study of CSU job descriptions examined a snapshot of CSU institutional discourse about HEA work. It focused on the language used to “describe” G2/G3 generalist jobs compared to G4-G7 and especially to G4 jobs, as this is the first (gendered) key career transition point at CSU (cf. 4.2.2) and in HEA (cf. Chapter 1). This study aimed to provide (partial) answers to the following question:

How is HEA work described and constructed (immediately prior to the start of the main data collection) in a sample of CSU job descriptions, as a form of institutional discourse? In particular, how is lower-level generalist admin work (mostly done by women) described/constructed in the sample of G1-G3 generalist compared to G1-G3 specialist work and G4+ (especially G4) roles?

The next section introduces the methodology; the following sections discuss the analysis, preliminary results, and implications of this exploratory study.

Appendix C.i. Methodology

The corpus-based study provided exploratory, partial insights into a snapshot of institutional discourse, of which job descriptions (henceforth JDs) were deemed an accessible and interesting example. JDs are concise, official and relatively standardised – hence easily comparable – descriptions/constructions of the tasks and skills a given role involves. Before being published online, JDs go through several layers of institutional approval, including line-management and HR, to ensure they comply with the university’s rules and regulations and equal opportunity legislation.

JDs play a key role in the recruitment process, which, for professional and support staff (at CSU and in HEA generally speaking) also includes progression⁶¹. They are the interface between a prospective employee and, in this case, CSU as the prospective employer. Candidates need to demonstrate that they meet each point in the person specification part of the JD, and that they have had experience and/or possess the skills required to successfully carry out the tasks outlined in the JD. For current employees, JDs are reference documents against which their performance (including applications for regrading or responsibility allowance) is assessed, e.g. in appraisal. If current employees wish to progress (upwards or sideways), they will need to show that they have bridged the gap between their current and future JDs. Of course, JDs are not the only type of institutional discourse, and the insights

⁶¹ As PS staff are usually not promoted, they need to apply for a new vacancy if they wish to progress their career, i.e. they need to go through the standard recruitment process.

provided by this study are therefore only partial and preliminary. This was not considered as a substantial limitation of the study (cf. G.iv. for further discussion), because of its exploratory nature and aim to provide insights and inform the main data collection phases.

The data collection process for this study consisted in downloading and saving all publicly available PS⁶² JDs advertised on CSU's website for a period of 18 weeks between 14th February and 23rd June 2014 (n=106). This collection of JDs satisfied the broad definition of a corpus as a 'bod[y] of naturally occurring language data stored on computers' (Baker, 2006: 1), although it was relatively small (a total of 86,754 words after "cleaning", cf. below). JDs are carefully crafted texts, but they nonetheless are "naturally occurring", as they are not produced for the purposes of analysis (Mills, 1997).

Corpus linguistics is 'the study of language based on examples of real life language use' (McEnery & Wilson, 1996, cited in Baker, 2006: 1), using techniques or procedures which 'manipulate this data in various ways [...] in order to uncover linguistic patterns' (Ibid). Corpus techniques have recently been employed beyond linguistics (e.g. CASS, the ESRC-funded, Lancaster-based centre for Corpus Approaches to the Social Sciences⁶³), and/or to study discourse in Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS). As Baker points out, this type of approach to corpus linguistics is taken by 'linguists [or social scientists] who use corpora' (Ibid, citing Partington 2003), rather than by 'pure' corpus linguists. Corpus linguistics is often considered as quantitative methodology, as it is interested in e.g. frequency and statistical co-occurrence. However, Baker argues that, as long as it is used as a supplementary method of inquiry, corpus linguistics methodology is not incompatible with the social constructionist perspective upon which discursive research is often based (cf. 4.1.2).

This exploratory study can be defined as a small-scale CADS or corpus-based study, in that corpus linguistics was used as a *method* to explore language about a topic, rather than as a theory of language itself (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001; Baker, 2006). Corpus techniques were employed to collect and investigate JDs as examples of institutional discourse about HEA (and particularly admin) work, in preparation for the main spoken data set production. Results from the corpus-based study also informed the second literature review stage (cf. Chapter 3). A corpus-based study of JDs was considered as a suitable way to get an – albeit partial – insight into a snapshot of CSU

⁶² Apart from support/manual roles.

⁶³ Where I attended training before conducting this corpus-based study.

institutional discourse before moving on to explore local, situated discourses, including interpretations of institutional discourse. By collecting and analysing a random sample of texts, analysts can avoid “cherry-picking” interesting examples, ignoring or overanalysing certain elements (Baker, 2006), and are thus able to get informed insights into the language used in a given genre.

Once collected, the 106 Word documents were copied and pasted onto Text Documents (.txt), and tagged according to their grade, location (i.e. by School or Central Service), and whether they could be considered as generalist or specialist roles. All tags were entered into a spreadsheet, next to the respective job title. Sub-corpora were then created to enable comparisons: a G1⁶⁴, 2 & 3 generalist JD sub-corpus (n=46; 6+19+31), a G1, 2 & 3 specialist JD sub-corpus (n=11; 0+2+9), a G4-G7 JD sub-corpus (n=49: 19+25+4+1); a G3 generalist (n=31) and a G4 (n=19) sub-corpus, to focus on the afore-mentioned key career transition point. Due to the low number of generalist G4+ JDs (n=6 out of 49, which in itself raises questions on progression opportunities for generalist G3 administrators), the distinction between generalist and specialist roles was dropped for G4+ JDs. This suggests that progression is linked to specialisation, which turned out to be a sub-theme in the spoken data sets (cf. Chapters 7 & 9).

The sub-corpora were then cleaned, i.e. prepared for upload to corpus linguistics software packages by formatting the layout and deleting repeated or unrelated information (e.g. CSU's motto & logo, salary, terms & conditions etc.)⁶⁵. The sub-corpora were then uploaded to two corpus linguistics tools: AntConc (Anthony, 2014), a freeware concordance programme, which was used to carry out concordance and collocate analyses, and Wmatrix (Rayson, 2009), which was instead used to conduct keyword and semantic keyness analyses.

Appendix C.ii. Analysis

The main corpus linguistic techniques carried out on the sub-corpora were:

⁶⁴ Only administrative G3 roles (all Central university vacancies): these employees were still part of the target group when the corpus-based study was conducted, and the decision was later made not to include them in the main data collection as this grade does not appear to be used in Schools.

⁶⁵ Other information that was deleted included: a description of the University, School, department, office, unit the role belonged to; one paragraph with job title, department, school/portfolio, grade, tenure and any line-management relations, which appeared twice, was deleted so that it only featured once in each JD; information on how to apply, including HR website and telephone number (standardised paragraph); extra spaces and breaks, bullet points.

- Frequency lists: lists of items of a given type (e.g. words, verbs etc.) ranked by frequency (i.e. the number of occurrences in a given corpus);
- (Positive) Keywords: words in a corpus whose frequency is unusually (significantly) high in comparison with a reference corpus⁶⁶;
- Word clouds: a 'visualisation of the items that are significantly more frequent' in a corpus compared to a reference corpus (Rayson, 2009);
- Collocates: words which significantly co-occur, more often than would be expected by chance alone;
- Concordances, or key words in context (KWIC): 'a list of all the occurrences of a particular search term in a corpus, presented with the context that they occur in: usually a few words to the left and right' (Baker, 2006: 71);
- Semantic Keyness: the most frequent key semantic concepts featuring in a corpus when compared to a reference corpus.

The sub-corpus of G1-G3 generalist JDs was compared to its specialist counterpart and to the G4+ sub-corpus. Because of the study's focus on the (gendered) key career transition point between clerical and middle-management/senior administrative grades, the G3 generalist sub-corpus was compared to the G4 sub-corpus. Only the most relevant results are reported on in the next sub-section.

Appendix C.iii. Results

Word lists, collocates and concordances (G1-G3 generalist, G2/G3 specialist & G4+ sub-corpora)

Simple frequency word lists (cf. Table 12, p. 335) are a useful starting point: frequent items can be further investigated by carrying out concordance and collocate analysis. The G2/G3 generalist sub-corpus includes roles that are student-oriented: if combined, 'student(s)', i.e. the lemma student*, would be the most frequent word in this sub-corpus. These roles are also about working in a team and office (also using Microsoft Office), providing support and service. The G2/G3 specialist sub-corpus frequency list, including words such as system, information and software, suggests that this sub-corpus comprises mainly IT services roles, located in central university departments. Interestingly, the lemma student* does not feature in the list. Frequent words in the G4+ sub-corpus include 'development', 'business', 'professional', and 'management' (cf. further discussion below).

⁶⁶ A log likelihood test was used to calculate keyness.

Frequency ⁶⁷	G1-G3 GEN	G2/G3 SPEC ⁶⁸	G4+
1	support	support	experience
2	experience	university	support
3	student	experience	development
4	work	service	university
5	ability	services	business
6	team	information	team
7	office	systems	professional
8	service	skills	skills
9	skills	software	management
10	students	team	work

Table 12: Frequency lists in the G1-3 generalist, G2/G3 specialist and G4+ sub-corpora

Interestingly, the word *ability* features frequently only in the G1-G3 generalist sub-corpus. Some of its collocates are ‘work’ (e.g. ‘ability to work quickly’), ‘deadlines’ (e.g. ‘ability to work to demanding deadlines’) ‘people’ (e.g. ‘ability to deal with people with tact’) ‘team’ (e.g. ‘ability to work in a team’), and ‘prioritise’ (e.g. ‘ability to prioritise’). The Merriam Webster online dictionary defines *ability* as ‘the quality or state of being able [...] natural aptitude or acquired proficiency’, whereas *skill* as ‘the ability to do something that comes from training, experience, or practice [...] a learned power of doing something competently’. The fact that *ability* is only frequent in the lower-level, generalist sub-corpus seems to offer (preliminary) support to insights from the literature (e.g. Eveline, 2004; Tong, 2014; cf. Chapter 2) claiming that the work carried out by ‘ivory basement workers’ is often considered as unskilled, or as not requiring training.

In order to further investigate this, collocate⁶⁹ and concordance analyses were carried out on ‘skills’, ‘support’ and ‘service’, which are frequent words in all sub-corpora. These showed that the type of support, service and skills required in the roles included by the three sub-corpora is rather different. For example, whilst G1, 2, and 3 generalist roles are described as mainly providing administrative support⁷⁰ and support to students or colleagues in their team or office, grade 4+ roles provide ‘strategic’, ‘learning’ support, and support to the university’s business systems. G1-3

⁶⁷ Lexical only (excludes grammatical words).

⁶⁸ No G1 specialist roles were advertised in the period in which the corpus was built.

⁶⁹ On AntConc: T-score was selected as the statistical measure, minimum frequency was set to 3 and the window span was set from three words to the left of ‘support’ to three words to its right.

⁷⁰ Out of the 229 times the word *support* occurs in the G1-3 generalist sub-corpus, it collocates with the word *administrative* approximately 25% of the times (n. 57, of which 55 to the left, as in ‘administrative support’). In the G4+ sub-corpus, *support* has 127 types of collocates, suggesting that these roles are much more specialised. The terms ‘university’, ‘student’ (but not ‘students’) and ‘experience’ are frequent collocates of *support*, and concordance lines showed that these roles provide student/university *experience* support.

generalist role-holders provide front-line administrative support to students / colleagues, whereas grade 4+ roles support the student (learning/university) *experience*, (i.e. they provide second- or third-line support).

As for the type of service provided, the most frequent collocate (even when considering grammatical items) in the G1-G3 generalist sub-corpus is customer, and the picture provided by other collocates (e.g. 'provide', 'excellent', 'student', 'effective') is rather homogenous. As with support, the JDs included in the G4+ sub-corpus describe roles which are involved somehow in customer service, but mostly in a second or third-line capacity, providing a more diversified service (as demonstrated by the high number of collocates). G4+ role-holders require an 'understanding of working in customer service environment', 'an ethos of outstanding customer service', 'proven experience of the delivery of the highest quality customer service', to cite some concordance lines. The service they provide is defined as 'professional' and 'outstanding', and their responsibility lies e.g. in the 'development' and 'delivery' of 'agreed' service 'levels'.

Finally, collocate⁷¹ and concordance analyses of skills in the G1-3 generalist sub-corpus showed that these jobs are described as requiring 'excellent' / 'good' 'communication', 'written', 'IT', 'interpersonal' 'customer', 'time-management', 'organisational' 'oral' and 'listening' skills. Some of the skills are also G4+ role requirements (e.g. communication and interpersonal skills); however, 'customer' and 'organisational' are not collocates of skills in this sub-corpus. G4+-specific skills include 'management', 'presentation', 'trouble-shooting', 'problem-solving', 'negotiating' and 'influencing': these can therefore be considered as some of the skills that G3 employees should supposedly acquire in order to progress.

One interesting point should be made about the lemma admin*. The term administrative is the 18th most frequent lexical word in the G1-3 generalist sub-corpus, followed by administration (44th) and administrator (115th). This means that the lemma admin* occurs 203 times in this sub-corpus, making it the third most frequent lexical term after support and experience. The terms deriving from the lemma admin* are considerably less frequent in the other two sub-corpora, not even making the top 200 (for specialist roles) and 300 (for grade 4+ roles). This suggests that admin* is a label specific to lower-level generalist roles, which resonates with insights provided by the

⁷¹ Collocate analysis in this case was conducted using both the T-score and MI (Mutual Information) statistical measures and comparing lists. MI calculates the strength of collocations in a given corpus, thus giving statistical saliency to collocations which are particularly strong in each corpus respectively, i.e. are 'corpus-specific' (although by doing so it 'tends to give high scores to relatively low frequency words' (Baker, 2006: 102) when compared to T-score).

literature (cf. Chapter 2). G2/G3 FG participants were thus recruited using the term administrators (cf. 4.1.4; though this definition was open to debate, cf. 5.1), and are referred to as such throughout this thesis.

Keywords & Word Clouds (G1-G3 generalist, G2/G3 specialist & G4+ sub-corpora)

Word clouds provide a visualisation of keywords, i.e. of the items that are significantly frequent (or key, i.e. their keyness) in a corpus when compared to a reference corpus. A larger font indicates greater significance (Rayson, 2009). The G1-3 generalist sub-corpus was compared to its specialist and higher-grade counterparts (cf. Figure 11) and viceversa (cf. Figure 12), to flag up sub-corpus specific terms for further investigation. As previously noted, the lemma admin* is statistically frequent in the G1-G3 generalist sub-corpus when compared to the G4+ (as well as the specialist) sub-corpus. Figure 11 provides a visualisation of the main types of work, tasks and skills which are typical of the roles making up this sub-corpus. Circled in red are terms which relate to general administrative/clerical tasks; in yellow, terms which are broadly related to customer/student service; in green, words linked to the support component of these roles.



Figure 11: Keywords in the G1-G3 generalist sub-corpus, compared to the G4+ sub-corpus



Figure 12: Keywords in the G4+ sub-corpus, compared to the G1-G3 generalist sub-corpus

Although not presented here, the word cloud visualising frequent words in this sub-corpus when compared to its specialist counterpart shows that the first two (administrative/clerical; student/customer service) are also the areas which make lower-level JDs *generalist* rather than specialist (whereas ‘assistant’ is also frequent in the G2/G3 specialist sub-corpus, because they are lower-level roles). When the G4+ sub-corpus is compared to the G1-3 generalist sub-corpus (cf. Figure 12, p.337), words such as ‘professional’, ‘develop’, ‘development’, and ‘business’ feature again; other keywords include ‘industry’, ‘enterprise’, ‘knowledge transfer’, ‘partnerships’, ‘practice’, ‘projects’, ‘strategy’ and ‘technology’.

Keyness analysis was also carried out on verbs, to compare what G1/G3 generalist role holders are supposedly required to do compared to G4+ role holders and viceversa. To sum up, G1-G3 generalist employees assist, prepare, and minute, grade 4+ role holders develop, lead, build, implement and improve; while lower-level administrators are responsible for ‘processing’, ‘filing’, ‘compiling’ and ‘arranging’, G4+ managers are in charge of ‘testing’, ‘networking’ and ‘developing’. The lemma assist* appears in two of its forms in the top 20 most frequent verbs for G1-G3 generalist administrator jobs, whereas forms of the lemma develop* appears three times in the G4+ list.

G1-G3 CSU generalist JDs thus appear to describe the work of those defined by Whitchurch as ‘routine clerical’ workers or ‘bounded professionals’, a blend of ‘soft’ (i.e. caring, supportive and student/customer-oriented) and ‘hard’ administration, i.e. responsible for ensuring, often inflexibly, that rules and regulations are followed (2008: 71-2, cf. Chapter 2). G4+ JDs instead resonate with Whitchurch’s definition of ‘administrative/knowledge managers’, i.e. those in charge of

making and implementing decisions through a process of continuous, evidence-based analysis, joining the creativity of developing policy with the craftsmanship of presenting and explaining it, and the political skill required to defend it (2004b: 1; cf. Chapter 2).

Focusing on G3 generalist and G4 JDs only, in order to explore the (gendered) key career transition point between ‘routine clerical’ workers and ‘administrative / knowledge managers’, keyword and semantic keyness analyses were carried out on each sub-corpus, using the other as the reference corpus.

Keywords & semantic keyness (G3 generalist & G4 sub-corpora)

Keywords	G3 GEN	G4
1	office	business
2	Director	Play
3	financial	specific
4	administrative	Testing
5	records	develop
6	finance	New
7	meetings	Office
8	point of contact	analyst
9	compliance	development
10	alumni	supportive

Table 13: Keywords in the G3 generalist sub-corpus compared to the G4 sub-corpus and vice versa.

What these keyword lists sketch are rather dissimilar pictures, summed up by the most frequent keyword for each sub-corpus: ‘office’ for G3 JDs, and ‘business’ for G4 JDs⁷². They do, on the other hand, provide a similar picture to the one offered by the previous comparison between G1-G3 generalist and G4+ corpora. This suggests that the difference in the language used to describe G1-G3 generalist vs. G4-7 roles may not necessarily be related to the arguably large gap between, potentially, a G1 and a G7 role. Rather, this difference is also typical of this specific key career transition point (G3 generalist to G4, i.e. clerical work to administrative / knowledge management).

G3 generalist JDs describe these roles as being, for example, administrative/clerical (e.g. ‘records’, ‘meetings’, ‘compliance’) and customer service (e.g. ‘Director’⁷³, ‘point of contact’, ‘alumni’ etc.) work. G4 role holders instead ‘play a major role in specific enhancements of current business systems to meet changing business needs and priorities’, need to have ‘business and financial acumen’ to ‘develop new and existing business systems’, and ‘play a supportive role in training business staff’, to quote a few example of concordance lines of ‘business’. They are also responsible for innovation and development (e.g. ‘testing’, ‘new’, ‘develop’ and ‘development’).

This picture of G3 employees as ‘keepers’ (or rules and regulations, records and budgets) and of G4 role holders as ‘innovators’ or ‘developers’ also emerged via a semantic keyness analysis. Wmatrix features an in-built semantic tagger. This feature of the software automatically tags words and groups them into pre-established

⁷² ‘Office’ also features in the top ten keywords in the G4 sub-corpus; however, this is because these role holders are required to manage e.g. the office/course office team.

⁷³ ‘Director’ appears in the G3 sub-corpus because these role holders are required to e.g. support/work closely with the Director.

semantic fields (with approximately 91% accuracy). This allows for an analysis of semantic field keyness (i.e. how significantly frequent a semantic field is) in a given corpus in comparison with a reference corpus. Key semantic domains featuring in the G3 generalist and G4 sub-corpora were thus compared to each other:

Key semantic domains	G3 GEN	G4
1	In power	Change
2	Paper documents and writing	Time: new and young
3	Money generally	Information technology and computing
4	Getting and possession	Mental objects: means and methods
5	Telecommunications	Business: generally

Table 14: Key semantic domains in the G3 generalist sub-corpus compared to the G4 sub-corpus and vice versa

The most statistically frequent concepts in the G4 sub-corpus are ‘change’ and ‘time: new and young’, which comprise lemmas such as ‘develop*’, ‘chang*’, ‘adapt*’ and ‘innov*’, and words such as ‘transformation’, ‘adjustments’, ‘new’, ‘modern’, and ‘advanced’. The semantic field of ‘information technology and computing’ include terms such as ‘systems’ (‘information systems’, ‘systems analysis’), ‘web’, ‘analyst’, ‘software’ and ‘programme’, and its keyness is likely to derive from the presence of IT roles on this grade. ‘Solution(s)’ is a word belonging to the concept of ‘mental objects’ together with ‘procedures’, ‘approach’ etc. The significant frequency of the semantic field of ‘business’ comes as no surprise, as ‘business’ was the most frequent keyword in this sub-corpus.

These results echo Mautner’s findings in her corpus study of keywords in contemporary higher education discourse about the ‘entrepreneurial university’:

the entrepreneurial university stands out as an iconic representation of the coming together of business and academia [...] As corpus evidence shows, entrepreneurial and its cognates come with a heavy load of commercial connotations (2005: 112),

and a language ‘of rapid movement’ and change. This

ties in with [...] the] characterisation of the entrepreneurial university as being “restless” and “always on the move” (Ibid: 105, citing Barnett, 2003).

As for the G3 sub-corpus, the semantic field of ‘paper documents and writing’ (including words such as: ‘post’, ‘records’, ‘filing’, ‘diary’, ‘documents’, ‘invoices’, ‘diaries’, ‘clerical’, ‘letters’, ‘draft’, ‘agendas’, ‘application’ etc.) recalls the clerical/administrative nature of roles on this grade, as do terms included in the ‘money’ (e.g. ‘budget’,

'financial') and 'telecommunications' (e.g. 'phone') semantic fields. 'Paper documents and writing' is only 95th in the list of key domains in the G4 sub-corpus, suggesting it is an area of work specific to clerical/administrative roles but not a significant requirement for these G6 posts.

The semantic domain of 'in power' needs to be contextualised: it comprises words such as 'Director(s)', 'executive', 'board', 'chief', committee, etc., i.e. terms related to higher-grade employees G3 role holders are required to provide support to. The lemmas 'manag*' and 'admin*' are also included in this key semantic domain. A collocate and concordance analysis of 'manag*' shows that, again, this lemma appears in relation to others, i.e. higher-grade employees G3 role holders are managed by. Often, the lemma 'manag*' refers to e.g. office, diary, files, and/or time management, i.e. organisational skills. The fact that Wmatrix associates the lemma 'admin*' with the semantic field of 'in power' is related to everyday language use, where 'administration' has connotations of power that within the UK higher education context it seems to have lost (as Whitchurch (e.g. 2013) points out when she talks of its devaluation, cf. Chapter 2). The keyness of the 'in power' semantic domain is also related to Wmatrix tagging HE-specific terms, e.g. 'general', 'officer' etc. as terms related to the military.

The keyness (i.e. significant frequency) of the lemma manag* in the G3 and G4+ sub-corpora is instead in line with its general language use. 'Management' is in the top 10 most frequent lexical words in the G4+ sub-corpus, where the lemma 'manag*' appears 700 times in total versus 264 times in the lower-level corpus. The most frequent collocates of the lemma 'manag*' in the G4+ sub-corpus include: 'business', 'development' and 'enterprise' (mainly in job titles; suggesting that it is these role holders who play a key role in the 'entrepreneurial university', cf. above), 'experience' and 'skills' (e.g. 'relevant management experience', 'experience in a management role'); 'team' (e.g. 'manage a team of colleagues', 'manage team resources' etc.). This again resonates with Whitchurch's definition of 'knowledge managers' (even more so than that of 'administrative managers', as 'admin*' is not statistically frequent in this sub-corpus). It also suggests that previous experience management and/or management skills are likely to be key for progression in HEA (cf. 7.1).

Appendix C.iv. Implications and limitations of the corpus-based analysis

Implications for the wider study

Bearing in mind its limitations (cf. next sub-section) and its small-scale nature, the corpus-based analysis provided some useful, albeit situated and partial, insights into

CSU institutional discourse about HEA work at a particular point in time. Rather than providing generalizable claims, these insights, combined with those arising from literature, raised further questions to be explored, suggested further areas of literature to be reviewed (cf. Chapter 3), informed the design of questioning routes and the recruitment of participants for the main data collection stages.

For example, the decision was made not to include G1 administrators in the recruitment target group, due to the low number of vacancies and their absence from Schools; to recruit generalist administrators only, as the corpus-study suggested they are the ones who carry out 'ivory basement' work (Eveline, 2004), and correspond to Whitchurch's 'routine clerical' workers; to use the label 'administrator' to recruit G2/G3 participants for focus groups, but to ask G4+ interviewees to self-define (e.g. as managers, administrators or leaders); to interview only G4+ CSU employees who had progressed *internally* from G2/G3, in order to explore local discourses about progression through this (gendered) key career transition point.

A sample G4 JD (cf. Figure 13) was built as an output of the corpus-based analysis to prompt talk about progression in focus groups (cf. Q6, Table 2, p.75), as well as situated re-interpretations of this snapshot of institutional discourse (e.g. talk about skills, development opportunities etc.).

JOB PURPOSE AND MAIN RESPONSIBILITIES

- *Managing the office team (4 administrators and an administrative assistant), ensuring that they are fully trained and supported; overseeing their workload; mentoring them in their personal development*
- *Managing office space and resources, ensuring facilities are used effectively to maximize the use of space.*
- *Working alongside, and across, a wide range of University teams to project manage key periods in the academic calendar (e.g. registration and induction), and to monitor university standards and quality assurance.*
- *Liaising with exchange partners and internal stakeholders to successfully plan major activities.*
- *Improving current processes, policies, and practices, and introducing and developing new tools to ensure the service provided to students and academic staff is consistently professional and efficient.*
- *Seeking to develop and continuously improve our customer service, and our shared processes and systems; leading service development planning.*
- *Managing student feedback processes, including subsequent reporting and implementation of proposed improvements to enhance the student learning experience.*
- *Developing, understanding and reporting business statistics.*
- *Providing support to senior staff with implementing new ideas and strategic thinking.*
- *Developing new and enhancing existing business systems in order to meet changing business needs and priorities.*

Figure 13: Sample G4 JD, used as a prompt to elicit talk about progression in FGs

This sample G4 JD was put together by using keywords, collocations and concordance line examples from the G4 sub-corpus, on the basis of the analysis and results discussed in G.ii and G.iii (especially the keyword and semantic keyness analyses on pp.339-341). For instance, examples of concordance lines were selected which contained the lemmas 'manag*' and 'develop*' and the word 'business', due to their keyness in the G4 sub-corpus (compared to the G3 generalist sub-corpus). The idea was to convey G4 role-holders institutional image of 'innovators/developers' and prompt G3 administrators' situated reinterpretations from their own standpoint.

Investigating the G3 to G4 key career transition point at CSU was deemed particularly important not only because this is where the gender distribution starts changing (to then switch on senior grades). The corpus-based study also suggested that this is likely to be the suture point, at CSU, between two separate salary scales, which were merged into 51 spine points as a result of the National Framework Agreement in 2004 (Strike, 2010). The substantial "gap" between the descriptions/constructions of G3 generalist administrators as "keepers" and of G4 role holders as "developers" and "innovators" may thus be linked to the fact that these roles used to be on separate salary scales, and progression from the (female-dominated) clerical to the (male-dominated) senior administrative scales was not usually an option (Tong, 2014).

Further questions to be investigated via the main data collection stages thus included how this key career transition point, arising from the merger of two separate salary scales, is constructed as bridgeable, or not, in local discourses about career development and progression, about opportunities to specialise e.g. via sideways moves (ECU, 2014b), and, crucially, whether or not it is made sense of as gendered (cf. Chapter 9).

Limitations

Due to its exploratory nature, this corpus-based study has several limitations. First of all, in corpus linguistics insights cannot usually be generalised beyond the corpus/corpora being analysed. Claims can thus be made about the language of JDs included in the corpus, but not in relation to CSU institutional discourse about HEA work generally speaking. A much larger corpus would be needed, and on a much larger, e.g. national, scale, in order to get more than just partial, preliminary and exploratory insights into institutional discourse (which JDs are just one manifestation of).

During the period in which the corpus was built (Feb-June 2014), CSU was undergoing a process of restructuring, which meant that recruitment, in particular for permanent posts, was significantly reduced. A substantial number of lower-level generalist jobs were being advertised on a temporary basis through an agency working with, but independent from, CSU. These vacancies could not be included in the corpus-based study, as the job advertisements did not include a separate job description file, and their hourly pay was not straightforwardly comparable to the university grading system. During the second half of the corpus collection period, these temporary vacancies were monitored: 31 generalist administrative vacancies were advertised via the temping agency, whilst only 22 were posted to the university website.

As participants frequently mentioned during the research encounters (cf. Section 6.2), temping is often “the way into HEA”. This practice, however, raises some concerns. First of all, some of these temporary vacancies specifically target current students or recent graduates, thus implying that no specific skills or prior work experience are required to do these jobs. Secondly, by virtue of their being employed by the temping agency rather than directly by CSU, it is highly unlikely that these temporary employees’ demographic data are monitored and returned to HESA. Outsourcing these lower-level generalist vacancies could thus be contributing to an even starker gender (amongst other types of) imbalance in lower-level generalist jobs.

The afore-mentioned restructuring process also resulted in a standardisation of JDs (especially lower-grade JDs, as discussed in FGs, cf. Chapter 6). This means that JDs were updated shortly after the corpus study had been conducted, making its insights potentially out-dated. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, aimed at informing the main data collection phase, it was not considered necessary to repeat the study at the end of the restructuring process; by that time the main data collection process had almost been completed. It is also worth stressing that all participants had been recruited and had progressed on the basis of pre-update job descriptions. This exploratory study’s results were thus deemed appropriate to establishing and exploring a snapshot of institutional discourse relevant to the participants.

Appendix D. FG participants' pseudonyms

Note: Demographic data has been removed from this final thesis version.

FG n.	Pseudonyms
1	Calvin Jack James Rob
2	Amala Anna Kat Samya
3	Camille Jodie Natalie Peter
4	Andrea Jasmin Joan Victoria
5	Bev Francesca Stacey Yokow
6	Andy Beck Nick Rachel
7	Efie Nikki Monica Priya
8	Laura Majid Martina Pauline
9	Aba Mel Pam Vanessa