

Women are better suited to lead universities

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Research shows that women perform better than men on four out of five traits of effective leaders, says Øyvind Martinsen

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- By [Øyvind Martinsen](#)



Source: iStock

Gender equality in the workplace, and specifically among senior managers, is a topic that seems to be under scrutiny in almost every industry. But higher education is clearly being left behind.

It is undeniable that inequality still exists, and my recent research into leadership across multiple sectors suggests that this is a trend that leaves universities the poorer.

Indeed, my study concludes that women are, in fact, better suited to positions of management in all but one of the five categories I assessed.

These cover the widely recognised traits of effective leaders, including the ability to withstand job-related pressure (emotional stability); the ability to take the initiative and communicate with clarity (outgoing); an ability to innovate, to retain curiosity and ambition (openness to new experiences); the ability to support colleagues and work inclusively

(sociability); and, finally, an ability to set goals, to be thorough and to follow up (methodical).

With my colleague Lars Glasø, I analysed data from a survey of nearly 3,000 managers – more than 900 of whom were women, more than 900 in senior management and nearly 900 from the public sector – and found that women achieved higher scores in four of these five traits.

This indicates that women are far more naturally suited to positions of leadership than their male counterparts.

The one area in which women performed less well was the ability to withstand job-related stress.

So the obvious question to ask is whether this is in any way to blame for the glass ceiling that has long existed within universities and business schools?

It is undeniable that the top jobs in higher education carry a heavy burden of responsibility. But consider how women outperform men in the four other crucial areas.

A key aim of any education institution, much as in business, is to attract the best students and academics, to engage with the best companies and to increase productivity (and profit) through innovation.

What my study shows is that many female leaders are as good as or better than males in achieving these goals.

So the reality is that female leaders, selected on robust competence criteria, can be a far better choice. Crucially, the evidence is that they often have a much higher capacity for relating to others, which remains one of the more important criteria for effective leadership.

We live in a time when the status quo is being challenged – what better time to finally make the most of the female talent out there and to shatter the glass ceiling in our vital institutions?

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