



## A critical exploration of approaches to professional and leadership development to break the gender bias in academic practice and progression

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### ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical reflection on the extent to which professional development and mentoring schemes can challenge the gender bias in academic practice for women in Further and Higher Education. The paper begins by outlining the barriers and challenges to career progression for women academics in Higher Education and the extent to which interventions, in this case engagement in a formal mentoring schemes and leadership development, can be perceived to positively influence career progression and/or professional practice. The paper will then focus on the benefits and limitations of moving to a more digital approach to mentoring and professional development, to be more inclusive and further support women to engage with initiatives that will support career progression and/or practice enhancement, through the lens of initiatives at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI).

**Keywords:** professional development, gender, women academics, digital, leadership development, bias

### Introduction

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of initiatives for women working in education to develop leadership skills, confidence and engage in networking aimed at supporting career progression and addressing the male gender bias in senior roles in academia. These include formal initiatives such as institutional and sector mentoring and leadership programmes, and informal initiatives and opportunities including women's networks and online social networking. Although acknowledging the many benefits that these initiatives can offer, critically reflecting on the extent to which they can lead to career progression, by reviewing research studies that have explored these initiatives provides important insight into the limitations of them in relation to breaking the bias of gender parity in senior positions in education and academia. Additionally, further consideration is needed about when women-only spaces can be of value, such as for networking and sharing challenges with those also experiencing them within a safe space, in addition to when they are perhaps less effective. This can be because they can become focused and designed to address the skills (leadership) of women rather than raising awareness of the structural or cultural barriers to career progression and repositioning how leadership skills are measured and valued in academia.

COVID-19 led to some rich data on the impact that the pandemic for the academic practice for women, which arguably exasperated gender inequality in further and higher education. To some extent the hybrid working and professional development opportunities that became more readily available through COVID offered women the opportunity to engage more flexibly in professional development, either from home or by accessing recordings. However these opportunities have become less available as the sector moves back to in-person events and conferences post COVID, and they still do not address the structural and cultural barriers to progression for women in education.

This paper is written from the perspective of the author, a woman working in professional development who provides institutional leadership of various professional development initiatives, and who has also led institutional initiatives focused on the representation of women working in academic and professional roles and contexts within FE and HE.

### Gender representation in leadership and research in HE

An Advance HE Equality in Higher Education Staff Statistical Report published in 2022 (Advance HE, 2022) reported that gender imbalance in promotion into professional roles begins early after graduation, with women holding 47% of academic roles and while 71.5% of professors were male (statistics collected 2020-21). This is just a 3% increase compared to data collected in 2009/2010 (Morley, 2013) and is despite the majority of students in the UK being female (n=57%). The Advance HE report shows that as the contract level increases the proportion of female staff decreases, e.g. 32% of Heads of Institutions were female compared with 68.5% of assistant, professional or administrative staff. Furthermore 63.9% of senior managers were male, and among SET (Science, Engineering and Technology) subjects 70.7% of senior managers were male.

Male-dominance is not unique to the UK HE sector. Across the European Union 86% of HE university heads are men, 76% of whom are in professorial grades (O'Connor, 2020). Some of the barriers include the perception of the leadership role as being "demanding, aggressive and authoritarian" (Morley, 2013, p. 123) and best suited to males. Furthermore this male dominance in

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leadership can reproduce hierarchies because as relationships are forged and networks formed, this can position the woman as the 'other' (Morley, 2013 & Savigny, 2014, Crabtree & Shiel, 2018). Within these networks, discussions and judgements around suitability for promotion can further disadvantage women (Brown, 2000.) Furthermore, this masculinist working culture "understood to mean compliance to a regime of almost total and uninterrupted commitment to wages work" (Crabtree & Shiel, 2018, p. 901) does little to encourage women – who are more likely to be balancing work and caring commitments than their male colleagues – to remain and progress in academia. A lack of discussion around these issues leads to further compound the under-representation of women in senior and leadership roles in academia and sends a negative message to women who are earlier in their careers about their own prospects for success (Savigny, 2014).

The student perception on the competencies of teachers also has potential to create further barriers to progression. Kwok and Potter (2022) explored the gendered differences in students' perception of teaching excellence, and report on a study analysing the gender differences that students mentioned about their excellent teachers. This evidenced how male student descriptions of female teachers were stereotypically pastoral in comparison to how they described their male teachers. The authors drew on previous research to support this, and showing how women are often attributed female competencies such as being caring and nurturing whereas men are attributed cognitive traits such as instructional and scholarly. Kwok and Potter acknowledge that being valued for different competencies is not in itself an issue, but that those traits commonly attributed to females are often ascribed a lower value in academia than male-type competencies. Therefore, this does have the potential to effect chances of promotion and career progression because through processes like teaching evaluation, which Kwok and Potter acknowledge focus on cognitive aspects rather than pastoral, women are less likely to be considered successful than their male colleagues for whom their traits will potentially be favored more in evaluation outcomes.

Initiatives like Athena Swan Charter (Advance HE, n.d. a), launched in 2005, that awards a bronze, silver or gold award for commitment of HE institutions towards gender equality across all roles (previously focusing on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics STEM) aim to address this disparity. However, Athena Swan, as O'Connor (2020) contends and argues, drawing evidence from the work of Amery et al. (2019) and Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker (2019), has no leverage at very senior level to promote gender equality, has not changed the pay gap, and has not increased gender equality at a senior level nor changed organisational culture. Therefore, although providing a useful space for discussion around gender equality does not necessarily translate to positive breaking the bias in institutional structures and promotion routes.

Gender inequalities and lack of opportunities are experienced by academics in early career stages, as well as those seeking senior leadership positions. The report 'Inequalities in Academia – impact on early career researchers' (Marsay, 2020) which saw 20 interviews and 205 survey responses, reported how prior to COVID many PhD students were on zero-hours contracts and part-time working, and also underlined how women with caring responsibilities had challenges with moving for new academic positions. COVID exacerbated existing challenges with women taking on more academic work such as admin, marking and committee membership, alongside increased unpaid COVID research (Marsay, 2020). The report also highlighted a lack of understanding by male colleagues about the challenges for paid and unpaid working responsibilities and increase in caring responsibilities in the home. These challenges led to some women having feelings of guilt between juggling their caring responsibilities and their academic job. The report also underlined the implications and impacts on early career academics be competitive in job and promotion opportunities in the future. It is important to recognise though that caring responsibilities did effect both men and women, with a Vitae (2020) report indicating that COVID increased caring responsibilities led to a decrease in hours spent researching (42% women and 41% men), although overall men's publications rates were increased during COVID (Thackery, 2020).

### Approaches to professional development and mentoring to break the bias for women

Given the gender imbalance of senior positions in HE, and the perceptions of the value of women's traits in academia, universities have invested in professional development opportunities designed to support the leadership and career development and progression of women. Many of the initiatives outlined in this section do to some extent provide valuable leadership development and networking opportunities for women, and spaces to share challenges with others. However, few lead to actual progression or fully address the gender bias in leadership and senior positions in academia as explored in this section through the lens of research studies into mentoring, leadership programmes, and women's networks.

Within FE and HE institutions mentoring has become an established and efficient approach to harnessing the experience and expertise of staff through mentoring colleagues, usually in a one-to-one partnership, for professional development, professional recognition, supporting the development of early career/and under-represented groups, and the enhancement of academic practice and research. The role of the mentor is both skills based and psychosocial, requiring being able to provide professional development support and career guidance, and offering encouragement, confidence and listening support (Allen et al., 2004; Tan, 2013; Kumar & Johnson, 2019).

Women academics who took part in a 2018 research project identified mentoring and sponsorship as positive solutions to the barriers they identified through the research (Crabtree & Shiel, 2018). However, Kent et al. (2013) report that although mentoring is an established professional development opportunity for supporting under-represented groups, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions in academia therefore highlighting the limitation of the extent to which mentoring can influence career progression. Furthermore, Morley (2013) reports that even though mentoring is perceived as beneficial for women's careers, the effectiveness of formal mentoring programmes is 'contentious' and did not necessarily translate into

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women's promotions. The role of the mentoring programme to fix the problem of gender inequality as "an individualised response to problems that may require more collective or structural solutions" (Morley, 2013, p. 125), highlights the limitations to the perception that mentoring can positively break the bias in cultures and behaviours towards achieving greater gender balance in leadership and senior roles.

Marginalised groups can also find it difficult to find a mentor partner who is likeminded (Angelique et al. 2002, p. 196), although when paired with a mentor who has experienced similar challenges it can provide "the opportunity to develop their own thinking in the presence of others who faced similar experiences" (Padgett, 2004, p. 182). This is also supported in a literature review by Sorcinelli and Yun (2007) which showed that some women preferred to be mentored by other women because they could address issues that are particular to women, and that minorities were not as successful at finding mentors if they wanted same-race pairing which could provide more 'psycho-social' support than cross-race or cross-gender relationships.

Leadership programmes can offer opportunities to develop leadership skills and qualities, but without cultural changes can leave participants still feeling marginalised. For example, interviews with both academic and administrative women working in middle management positions or aspiring into those positions at a new Australian university found that a leadership programme resulted in participants feeling disenfranchised or side-lined, with one interviewee stating that having had the time to think about the workings of the university had served to "convince me that I am a poor fit with this university" (Burkinshaw & White, 2017, p. 9). These types of experiences further compound women's feelings of being 'othered' and disadvantaged.

Interviews carried out with 30 women who took part in the Advance HE women-only leadership programme Aurora (Advance HE, n.d. b) found that participating in the programme increased their motivation to seek leadership opportunities, and develop the skills of leadership and career management (Barnard et al., 2021). Although lower than other perceived benefits of taking part in the programme 30% of those interviewed agreed that the impact of Aurora meant that 'I openly challenge the system and/or culture of my workplace' and 40% agreed that 'I find way of turning systems and/or culture of my workplace to my advantage'. This shows the role of leadership programmes to highlight and challenge the cultures that are enablers to inequalities. In an evaluation carried out at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) on the perceptions of 15 participants on the Aurora programme highlighted that engagement in the programme "encouraged the participants to apply for senior roles and that they have valued the opportunity to explore their perceptions of leadership with their current professional practice" (Tilbury, 202, p. 84). However, the evaluation also showed a frustration that participants had about the lack of potential opportunities including to utilise their new skills, and a lack of a supportive workplace culture or recognition of home-working balance (Tilbury, 2021).

Since 1999, and in response to obligations under the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act and the underrepresentation of women in middle and senior positions, the University of Strathclyde developed a 'Managing Personal and Professional Development for Women' course and then a 'Women into Senior Management' course (Brown, 2000). The 'Managing Personal and Professional Development for Women' aimed to support women participants to consider career goals, their role within the university and in HE, strategies to enhance effectiveness and exploration of management skills and networking. Although no formal evaluation was undertaken, informal surveys showed that benefits of the course included promotion, increased motivation, relationship management with senior colleagues and peers, assertiveness and confidence increase, goal setting, networking and institutional awareness (Brown, 2000). The objectives of the 'Women into Senior Management' course included cross-institutional links, enhanced knowledge of management, communication and management skills development, developing career strategies and increasing confidence. This course was formally evaluated, with most participants reporting a change or progress including applying for senior roles or grades, prioritising workload, and increased confidence to say no. However, Brown acknowledges that "there are challenges to the concept of 'women only' staff development activities which merit serious consideration" (2000, p. 109). Brown draws on research that echoes similar findings or statements to those outlined in initiatives or women only programmes reported on in this paper (including assumptions that it is the behaviour of women that needs adjusted to fit with the social norm) as being male-created constructs. Brown argues, however, that through the focus of the Strathclyde courses on the wider topic of communication styles this then facilitates the opportunity to support an increase in confidence for women to overcome isolation and self-doubt as potentially derived from social exclusion.

Less formal professional development initiatives such as women's networks in HE can offer safe spaces from women to come together to discuss challenges and barriers for women working in education, to hear from inspirational women, take part in professional development and to lobby for change (Walker, 2021). A literature review carried out by Pini et al. (2004) on women-only spaces, drawing upon studies dating between 1986-2001, found that women's networks and other comparable initiatives could increase self-confidence, raise awareness of learning opportunities, and help women gain new skills and grow social networks. However, the authors also argue that these approaches and opportunities should not be seen as a single fix or approach for increasing women's representation in management positions which instead requires cultural and structural changes.

A report by the College Development Network (2022) indicated that Senior Leadership staff in the Scottish college sector spent more time training than other colleagues, with three in ten spending 40 hours of training and over half undertaking 25 hours of training in the 20-21 academic year. This was in comparison to those in academic/teaching roles where over a quarter exceeded 40 hours and for colleagues in professional services roles where only 14% exceeded this time on training. This in part is due to challenges relating to time/capacity to engage in professional learning. These findings raise the question of equity of access for engaging in relevant professional development opportunities, including for those staff who are amongst those most likely to benefit from professional development for both career and practice enhancement.

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The studies drawn upon thus far outline the benefits of mentoring, leadership programmes and women's networks which include increased confidence, development of leadership and communication skills and an opportunities to share challenges with those also experiencing them. There is an argument for both women-only spaces where women feel able to be open and explore challenges, network and develop confidence, and for spaces where women's voices are heard alongside male voices in order to develop understanding and challenge inequalities and gender bias in academic practice and progression structures. However, studies to date also highlight the limitations of such approaches in supporting women's progression in education and academia. Women only initiatives can focus on the development of women, whereas the barriers to women as explored in the first section of this article are structural and cultural, including the male dominance of senior positions but also the attributes that are associated with leadership often being considered male traits. Until the perceptions of what is considered excellent leadership changes and the gender balance at senior positions in tertiary education is addressed then unfortunately, while offering many positive benefits, the initiatives intended to support women's progression will always be limited in scope. On 7 February 2023 the Women in Academia Support Network posted on twitter that "We know of people who have been on 6, yes 6 (leadership training programmes) and still not progressed despite their excellence. It's almost like it's not about their leadership skills at all?" (WIASN, 2023)

### Digital and online approaches to mentoring and professional development: widening opportunities to engage

Typically, and pre-COVID, many of the aforementioned initiatives and professional development opportunities carried out in colleges, universities and external bodies, were delivered on campus/otherwise location-based which could be a challenge for women to take part if they hold caring responsibilities or limited budget for travel. For example, the Aurora Leadership Programme was delivered through a programme of on-location events across a number of months. Learning and Teaching conferences were typically offered on campus prior to COVID, and often exclusively for the staff of the respective institution. During the lockdown period of the pandemic, online events and conferences increased and thus increased the opportunity for engagement with professional development, without the inconvenience or cost of travel. Furthermore, the UK FE and HE sector saw an increase in institutions opening participation in online conferences and events to colleagues beyond their immediate institution. For women academics who reported taking on more of the caring responsibilities before and during COVID (Andrew et al., 2020), online professional development was now more readily accessible. For example, the UHI International Women's Day 2021 event was opened up to anyone working in education and moving from an in-person to fully online event therefore also opened up important discussions on gender equality and representation beyond a single institution or group. The 2021 event also saw the highest number of participants since UHI began to organizing annual events for International Women's Day back in 2018.

For leadership programmes, such as the Advance HE Aurora Leadership Programme which moved fully online and has remained online since COVID the flexibility to juggle caring responsibilities and attend professional development was now a possibility for participants, who previously had to travel to attend several professional development days.

In a paper that outlined the response to COVID in moving all educational and research activity at the University of Toronto's Department of Ophthalmology and Vision Sciences online, it was reported that this increased the opportunity for attendance from previously excluded groups including women, people with young children, those who have limited funding, and people living in remote locations (Kryshtalskyj et al., 2021). The paper goes on to acknowledge the underrepresentation of women in medicine, including attendance at conferences, on journal boards and as primarily authors in peer-reviewed journals. Increased involvement in continuing educational activities is, the authors report, a necessary first step to lessening the sex gap in medicine.

The move to open access approaches to professional and leadership development also supported engagement for colleagues working in rural locations. This included for universities within developing countries who now had access to more free online platforms to attend or deliver professional development. One study (Arnilla, 2022) which evaluated synchronous professional development (in the form of webinars) organised by a rural university in the Philippines, showed that attendance across three webinars increased the participants knowledge of the topics explored (female n= 260, male n= 92). The report did highlight challenges with bandwidth, unreliable electricity supply and outmoded internal cables causing unstable internet connection but concluded that "It provided both speakers and participants of professional development activities the accessibility, flexibility, and convenience while staying at home during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic" (Arnilla, 2022, p. 222).

However, a survey of 8,416 (51% of respondents were women) UK researchers by Vitae (2020) on the impact of COVID on researchers indicated that caring responsibilities disrupted both men and women's working hours, with an almost equal percent of men and women having to cancel important meetings and conferences due to caring responsibilities. In contrast an Advance HE report published in February 2021 (Aldercotte et al., 2021) reported that during COVID more women than men said the move to remote working enabled them to attend meetings, conferences and career development opportunities, so perhaps a disparity between early career researchers and other academics is highlighted across these respective studies. Importantly, the Advance HE report does go on to say that women who did not have access to adequate space were the least likely to say they had had the opportunity to engage in career development activities while working from home, meaning that not all women experienced the same level of benefit.

The move to online professional and leadership development has provided important access to underrepresented groups including women. This brings with it the potential for women to increase their network and enhance skills in learning and teaching practice, leadership and research. This in turn can support or link forward to individuals developing their leadership and readiness to lead.

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With the advancement of technology, online spaces which are both women-only spaces and spaces welcoming to all genders, to discuss challenges for women in HE and to champion change and to engage in professional development, have broadened the reach and visibility of gender equality in education beyond a single organisation or group (Walker, 2021). Leathwood (2004) argues how a combination of integrationist and separatist strategies that promotes change and challenges practices are often the most effective. Technology can play an important role in bringing together like-minded colleagues, male and female, to break down gender biased silos and provide opportunities to have conversations and develop understanding of the challenges to progression, explore the implications of perceptions of leadership traits, and support collaborations and networking that are more flexible.

The move to online approaches to professional development during COVID also shone a light on the role that academic and professional developers have in role modelling learning technologies used in learning and teaching. Furthermore, when practice was moved online during COVID, professional development quickly moved online to support learning and teaching (Bragg et al., 2021). Prior to COVID, fully online formal programmes of study were readily embedded in HE curriculum, often in relation to postgraduate certificates in learning and teaching, but professional development provision was largely offered on campus. The move to online also meant that academic and professional developers had an increased opportunity to role-model the online technologies that were now being expected to be increasingly used by teaching staff, to develop and showcase pedagogies that supported the development of practice (including in response to COVID), and to enable staff in better understanding the capabilities of learning and teaching technologies (Walker & Smyth, 2021). This is supported by the CDN report which outlined that 80% of staff who took part in their survey felt they would benefit from further training to improve digital capabilities (CDN, 2022). A study by Seddon et al. (2012) that explored the learning process in synchronous online seminars involving experienced educators found that being familiar with the technology used could encourage participants to feel less like an 'audience' and more involved in the 'presentation rights'. Furthermore, using existing learning and teaching technologies in professional development that have interactive functions like chat spaces, break out rooms and emoji sharing can help to develop a sense of community, common goal, reflection, and peer interaction (Campbell, 2016). For women who engage in online professional development, and as explored in elsewhere in this paper, these kinds of approaches and opportunities for engagement can be important factors in breaking down feelings of isolation and marginalization, and can nurture collaborations and the development of practice and opportunities.

### Digital approaches to professional development at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)

UHI is a geographically distributed and federated University, comprising 12 Academic Partner institutions (including FE and HE colleges, and specialist institutes) across the Highlands and Islands region of Scotland. UHI is a tertiary institution, the only one in Scotland offering learning from access level through to PhD. In 2020-21 UHI had 11,210 HE students and 19,779 FE students.

Due to this context and prior to COVID, a programme of professional development including a lunchtime webinar series sharing good practice, larger one-two day conferences and residentials, leadership development, and mentoring was offered online, hybrid and on campus(s), which ensured that colleagues across the partnership had opportunities to engage in relevant development opportunities. Although the driver for these hybrid approaches was to be inclusive to colleagues working across a dispersed geographical area, the advent of COVID (and, subsequently, the research that emerged as explored in this paper) highlighted the benefit of this online and flexible approach to professional development for women working in education.

During COVID professional development at UHI moved fully online and initially prioritised professional development that focused on supporting staff with the move to online learning and teaching, including through online 'coffee mentoring circles' discussing different aspects of online learning and teaching (Walker and Smyth, 2021). These mentoring circles utilised the expertise of colleagues engaged as mentors and mentees on the University Mentoring Scheme to provide guidance and support to staff who were either new to online learning and teaching or wanted to develop existing approaches to student support and learning.

The University Mentoring Programme has offered cross-college synchronous and asynchronous mentoring since 2017. The scheme comprises four strands of mentoring; Learning and Teaching Enhancement, Research, Scholarship Development and Professional Recognition. A mentoring Code of Practice underpins the mentoring activity, outlining five values or behaviours that should be role modelled in all mentoring partnership at UHI. Mentoring through asynchronous and synchronous technologies is not perceived to be a barrier to successful mentoring, and has the possibility to support the development of communities of practice and mitigate against isolation. A study by Homitz and Berge (2008) that was focused on email-mentoring to support an online programme of study, found that the "distance factor often allows participants to express themselves more freely than in face-to-face communication. This often provides a more honest, open, and reflective learning environment where...mentoring pairs can explore their values, feelings, and objectives more freely than when sitting in the same room" (Homitz & Berge, 2008, p. 330). This is echoed in the recent MEd research by the author of this paper, which covered experiences of the participants in the University Mentoring Scheme, including in using technology enabled approaches to mentoring (Walker 2021). Participants in the study (n=17 women) reported that they benefited from engaging with technology in several ways including asynchronously through email, synchronously by sharing the screen, and through sharing links and documents pertaining to their own mentoring context and activities. None of the participants felt that using synchronous technologies for mentoring conversations hindered the communication, with one participant sharing a common view in commenting "I would say it has allowed a bit of a safe space, virtual safe space, a little bit of distance, which allows people, the mentee to reflect more to pause to think they can share by email, they can share their screen, they can show me things, they can show me examples of things, links to pieces of work" (Walker, 2022, p. 53). As more professional development practices, including mentoring, moved online due to COVID, and as they

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hopefully remain to be available online across institutions and the sector going forward, the above study highlights that online delivery and engagement does not need to be perceived as a challenge to effective mentoring.

The UHI Women's Network was formed in 2018 after the university's first International Women's Day highlighted that a women-only network would be of benefit to colleagues across the UHI partnership. The network, which pre-COVID was offered through hybrid meetings and has ran fully online since, is open to colleagues who identify as women across professional services, research, teaching and leadership roles, and at any stage of their career. The Women's Network provides a space open for all women working at UHI, recognising that a space for only 'one' group within a group marginalised by gender would be counterproductive in not 'othering' women holding varied roles in education (Walker, 2021). Alongside the women-only network there is also an online University of Highlands and Islands Women's Network hosted in the internal digital social space Yammer. This is open to all, with male colleagues regularly contributing to the space to share articles, news items, and professional development opportunities for women, and to disseminate information of benefit or of interest to anyone passionate about gender equality in education at UHI.

The UHI initiatives outlined above, including hybrid and online professional development, short online webinars (with recordings), mentoring, and hybrid conferences, are important in offering inclusive approaches to professional development that – although not exclusively for women – will benefit women working at UHI because they offer flexibility and opportunities to engage with other colleagues regardless of geographical location or ability and resources to travel, or the need to always engage at or within specific timeframes. The Women's network offers both a safe women-only space to explore challenges, a recent example being developing an internal paper with recommendations on how women staff and students at UHI could be better supported through the menopause, and an online space where all staff are welcome to contribute and rally for gender equality and parity at and beyond UHI. Going forward, UHI will continue to offer inclusive and flexible approaches to professional development and networking, and champion this approach in the sector as we move on from COVID but seek not to step back from what we have learned through the pandemic in relation to: opening up our professional development offerings; remaining flexible in our delivery; and role-modelling technology used in learning and teaching through our professional development offerings.

### Summary and recommendations

In summary, professional development leadership programmes, networks, and initiatives such as mentoring have potential to develop skills, including leadership approaches, and confidence of women working in FE and HE. However, the extent to which they can break the bias of male-dominated senior leadership positions is hindered by the lack of career progression and opportunities within institutional structure, and cultures that need to change to allow the professional development offerings to have more sustained benefit for individuals and institutions. Therefore, institutions should address pathways for promotion, ensuring they are offer equity and are free of bias. Furthermore, ensuring that governing bodies in universities invite and encourage gender balance from its trustees will further support a balanced approach to decision making and influence.

Online approaches to mentoring and professional development, which have increased since COVID, have offered access and flexibility for colleagues to engage in practice development and networking. This benefits women who are reported to have more caring responsibilities than their male colleagues but again, until the challenge of increased representation of women in senior and leadership positions is addressed any development opportunities, while remaining valuable in the ways outlined in this paper, are limited in scope to the extent in which they can break the bias in academia. However, they do have the potential to develop knowledge and connections and break the bias in other ways including in research and publication, as well as scholarship and a sense of voice and contribution to knowledge through engagement in events, workshops, conferences and leadership programmes. For academics who might be on part-time or temporary contracts, which this paper shows to be proportionately women, then as well as offering more flexibility to engage in professional development online, hybrid approaches offer a more affordable option when budget or personal finances are not available to individuals to cover travel and accommodation. Therefore, academic and professional developers, as well as external organisations, should consider the range of hybrid and online options available through their professional and leadership development programmes, or which could be made available, so as to do not disadvantage colleagues who cannot easily travel, who are part-time, or who have other circumstances to contend with.

Finally, there is also a consideration that within learning and teaching, and professional development, then should the FE and HE sector seek to move back to face-to-face practices then what would this mean for women, but also for colleagues that due to disability or other factors including financial constraints, have a reduced opportunity to engage in a range of online professional development opportunities than they experienced during COVID? Further research into the future impact of this would be of value. For example, the CDN reported that a fifth of the college sector didn't engage in training that they felt they needed during 2020-21 academic year, due to time and lack of funding but also due to a preference to get back to face-to-face training with seven out of ten colleagues preferring this training method. This raises questions about how staff perceive online professional development and if they are protecting time to meaningfully engage online as they would if they needed to travel to attend?

It is important for institutions to consider how their colleagues are engaging with online and hybrid attendance at events, including offering protected time in the calendar, both during the activity but also with time before and after to engage in reflection on learning which is typically done through networking and travelling when events are on location and in-person. This then leads to another consideration as hybrid approaches are increasingly being adopted since COVID to provide flexibility, which lies in the extent to which these opportunities offer parity of experience for online and face-to-face participants which will be an important consideration for academic and professional developers going forward.

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### Biography

Alex Walker is Professional Development and Recognition Lead at the University of the Highlands and Islands. Alex founded UHI's first event for International Women's Day in 2018 and is interested in professional development and mentoring in dispersed contexts which utilises technology, and within ensuring that this is pedagogically driven and inclusive. Alex is on Twitter @Walker80alex

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