



Women in Higher Education

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Broadly speaking, Dr Aiston’s research looks at the status, position and experience of women in higher education. Within Hong Kong and Mainland China, this brings in the added aspect of the impact of traditional Chinese culture on this experience.

Within Hong Kong, Dr Aiston has undertaken a mapping exercise to generate a comprehensive gendered profile of the Hong Kong academy. It looks at women academics and to what extent they are represented across the eight UGC-funded institutions, mapping them across disciplines, and in leadership roles at three levels: first, Dean and above (of 110 positions only eight are held by women); second, associate and assistant deans and heads of departments and divisions; and third, distributed leadership, i.e. those roles that do not carry formal managerial titles, but nevertheless are important, such as programme directors, or heads of research centres. While the exercise has shown that women are under-represented in senior positions in the Hong Kong, this is a global phenomenon, and not unique to this context.

In Mainland China, women make up less than 25% of the academic population, which is in the lowest percentile internationally. Dr Aiston, in collaboration with Professor Louise Morley (University of Sussex), is also studying the phenomenon known in Mainland China as the ‘Third Gender’, or “left-over women”. The ‘fear’ is that a highly educated woman is unmarriageable, and this is viewed as potentially having the effect of undermining traditional society, or challenging societal order. Women referred

to as the 'Third Gender' are described as having the three highs – a high level of education (PhD level), a high income and a high-flying career. Dr Aiston is keen to explore the effect this phenomenon may be having on the uptake of graduate education by women in the Mainland.

Women now comprise more than 50% of the undergraduate population worldwide. Although this increase is, of course, far from universal and disciplines remain highly gendered, women are sometimes seen as “taking over”. One possible result of this perception is that university cultures – for example, in the UK – have increasingly become more ‘laddish’. National Union of Students’ reports have revealed increasing sexual harassment against women, and a laddish culture that enables this to continue.

When studying the gender issue in any career, the ubiquitous question ‘can a woman juggle career and family successfully?’ is never far away. A comparative analysis of the research productivity of women with and without familial commitments, across five countries, shows that often the former publish more and perform better than their childless counterparts – a finding that is counter-intuitive.

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Dr Aiston argues that the long-standing preoccupation with this particular question could be resulting in other issues of relevance being overlooked. The familial factor is out

of the university’s sphere of influence – the provision of e.g. crèches and maternity leave notwithstanding. Focusing on such factors as if they were the major explanation for the research productivity gap between male and female academics might well prevent progress being made with respect to tackling other barriers, for example, ensuring equity in workload allocation.

Dr Sarah Jane Aiston has a long-standing research interest in the status, position and experience of women in higher education, as students and as academics, and from both a historical and contemporary perspective. She is currently researching the underrepresentation of women as academic leaders, the phenomenon of the 'Third Gender' in Mainland China and the representation of gender in the student press of the University of Cambridge.