Leadership insights

ONWARDS AND UPWARDS? TRACKING WOMEN'S WORK EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Year 2 Report

Overview

The Onwards and Upwards study, conducted by Sarah Barnard, John Arnold, Sara Bosley and Fehmidah Munir at Loughborough University, gathers and considers the views and progression of women in higher education who have participated in the Leadership Foundation's Aurora leadership programme. Using longitudinal mixed-methods research, it looks at career trajectories, aspirations and work experiences. A comparison group of women in similar university roles is being tracked over the same time period.

The themes emerging from the Year 2 data analysis revolve around two key areas: leadership approaches and practice, and institutional structures and practices. The study considers what is working or making a difference, as well as the challenges women face and what needs to change.

Context

Launched in November 2013, Aurora is the Leadership Foundation's women-only leadership development programme. It is targeted at women up to senior lecturer level or professional services equivalent working in a university, college or related organisation who would like to develop and explore issues relating to leadership roles and responsibilities. Aurora is delivered primarily through a series of events over several months in different locations in the UK and Republic of Ireland. So far nearly 3,500 women have completed Aurora, with a further 1,000 undertaking the programme in 2017-18.

According to Hefce (2016), 49% of the academic workforce in higher education institutions (HEIs) are women. However, they remain poorly represented at senior level. In the academic year 2014-15, only 18% of vice-chancellors/principals, 36% of heads of major academic areas, and 24% of professors were women. Women in support and professional services seem to be somewhat more successful than their academic colleagues in achieving senior positions. While 62.7% of this staff group are women, in 2013-14 they comprised 39.6% of directors of a major function or group of functions and 43.8% of senior functional heads.

The Aurora Year 1 findings suggested that women's leadership activities in HEIs are sometimes unrecognised and unrewarded, with evidence of women going above and beyond requirements for their current role. Stepping up to leadership roles did not necessarily lead to reward or recognition of contributions made.

Importantly, survey responses revealed that women do not believe that they lack leadership skills, but they do find it challenging to secure opportunities to employ their skills effectively. Contexts in which women working were perceived to be problematic and the culture and practices were reported as limiting women's leadership potential. With regard to work and life outside work, 70 per cent reported negative work impacts on home life, but only a quarter reported that home life impacted negatively on work. Across the range of questions posed, professional services staff were more positive in their views, highlighting the impact of culture and structural issues that depend on position and role

in the organisation. Furthermore, an analysis of responses by ethnicity showed that BAME women are more negative than others, but also more likely to report a desire to rise to senior positions.

The initial results pointed to some positive effects of Aurora. Aurorans indicated positive experiences of the programme itself. Regarding perceived effects of Aurora, they reported increased leadership skills, motivation, willingness to advance their career and ease with being in a position of authority.

In the year 2 analysis, the research team has begun to test these perceptions with longitudinal as well as cross-sectional analysis.

Approach

The first year of the project (April 2015-March 2016), involved a review of the relevant literatures. The researchers also surveyed a total of 1,576 women, made up of 195 from cohort 1 of Aurora (2013-14), 408 from cohort 2 (2014-15), 667 from cohort 3 (2015-16), and 306 "comparison" women who had not undertaken Aurora.

A detailed description of the participants in year 1 of the study, and of the data they provided, can be found in the year 1 report: **www.lfhe.ac.uk/Aurorastudy**

This insight paper centres on the findings from year 2 of the study. Consequently the data sources include quantitative and qualitative material that have been collected at different time points. The in-depth interview and data collected from "diarists" – women asked to submit three diary entries about their involvement in leadership activities - have been analysed thematically and fed into the quantitative analysis presented.

Some qualitative data were also collected via open questions in the online surveys and have been analysed for this report.

In the second year of the study researchers surveyed a further 597 women from cohort 4 (2016-2017) of Aurora and included an additional 67 comparison group respondents, bringing the total number of women completing at least one survey to date to 2,240. The surveys were carried out between October 2016 and March 2017.

A second, follow-up survey, carried out from October to December 2016, was completed by 172 women from Cohort 2 (2014-2015) and 261 from Cohort 3 (2015-2016), as well as 113 comparison women, surveyed between January and March 2017, giving survey data for 546 respondents at two time points a year apart.

A sample of eight Aurorans per cohort in cohorts 2 and 3 took part in semi-structured interviews; four of their mentors were also interviewed. The Aurorans in cohort 2 were interviewed between December 2015 and January 2016, and again between January and February 2017. Interviews with eight Aurorans in cohort 3 were conducted between January and March 2017. Mentors were interviewed during the same time period as the first interviews with Aurorans. Eight diarists were recruited from cohort 3.

Continuing contact with, and collecting data from, women in higher education over time is a crucial aspect of the study, as it allows the tracking of careers and experiences.

Aurora interviewees and diarists were asked about the leadership activities they were involved in, and what enabled and hindered their successful engagement in leadership. When first interviewed, Aurorans were asked about their leadership skills, how they addressed challenges and made the best of opportunities. In the second interview, they were asked about changes in their work, about the leadership styles they had encountered, and changes in their perception of leadership. Second interviews focused on cultural and structural barriers to engagement in leadership. In these interviews, Aurorans were asked what would make it easier to engage in leadership. Analysis explores the participants' understanding of leadership, their role in leadership activities, and what enables and hinders their engagement in leadership.

Diary data were collected between October 2016 and February 2017. Six diarists submitted all three entries; one submitted two entries and one submitted only one entry.

Table 1: **Women taking part in the Onwards and Upwards surveys**

Respondents	First Survey (n)	*Second Survey (n)
Women taking part in Aurora		
Cohort 1 (2013-2014)	195	-
Cohort 2 (2014-2015)	408	172
Cohort 3 (2015-2016)	667	261
Cohort 4 (2016-2017)	597	-
Comparison Women	373	113
Total	**2240**	**546**

*Cohort 2 completed their follow-up survey 15-21 months after finishing Aurora whereas cohort 3 completed their second survey 3-9 months after finishing Aurora. The comparison women completed their first and second surveys at approximately the same times as cohort 3.

Limitations

The research has an unusually strong design in terms of timescale, multiple cohorts, comparisons between Aurorans and others, and the volume and diversity of the data. However, there are inevitable limitations. Most of the material presented is based upon the experiences and perceptions of women in higher education rather than objective information about their leadership skills and activities, although some data have been provided by mentors.

The survey follow-up response rates were lower than ideal, despite reminders and carefully worded requests for continued participation. Because of the large number of questions in the survey, some trends will be statistically significant by chance. To limit this last danger, researchers generally adopted a probability of 0.02 instead of 0.05 as the statistical significance requirement, and examined sets of related questions rather than isolated ones. Also, of course, trends in mean levels in large samples do not preclude plenty of people bucking the trend. In nearly all of the quantitative self-report variables, the correlations between scores in year 1 of the study and scores in year 2 were around 0.3 to 0.5. This indicates some continuity but also quite a lot of flux in terms of respondents' scores relative to each other. A more detailed acknowledgement of the limitations of the study has been outlined in the Year 1 report.

Results that suggest that participation in Aurora impacts on participants' work behaviour over time, or at least, how they interpret their behaviour, need to be cautiously read. Having invested time into the Aurora programme, these women may well be motivated to report more leadership skills and activities after the programme than before it. Furthermore, their focus of attention may be shaped by what is covered on Aurora and the orientations to it exhibited by course leaders and participants.

Key findings

Leadership approaches

The way the respondents talk about leadership and the examples they offer suggest that for these women leadership means being in charge of tasks rather than large-scale co-ordination and strategising. Crucially, women in general thought they had the skills and behavioural repertoires to handle leadership roles and there is some evidence that the Aurora programme boosted this belief.

Aurorans' perceptions became more positive over the year between the first and second surveys, compared to the comparison group. Aurora women increased in the extent to which they reported seeking leadership activities, telling others what they need to do in order to be rewarded for their efforts, being able to inspire others, challenging organisational culture, knowing how the organisation runs, mentoring others, seeing innovative solutions to problems, challenging others to see things differently, and being comfortable with power.

Survey, interview and diary data all indicated that respondents in this study tended to see themselves as emphasising "soft" skills (consultative, interpersonal or developmental). In contrast, they often saw people in positions of authority in their workplace (predominantly but not only men) as majoring on hard skills; characterised by managerialism, autocratic decision-making, performance management, targets and aggression. With very few exceptions 'hard' leadership was regarded negatively. Responses indicated, however, that while women might have seen themselves as collegial and collaborative, there was an increasing awareness that this does not mean they are a "soft touch".

Leadership practice

Women were involved in many leadership activities, both formal and informal. These included management, change management, people development, teaching/curriculum development and research.

Some had formal management roles in recruiting and dismissing staff, controlling finances and developing the

business aspects of their institution. Others, while not holding formal positions, were responsible for management-level work such as coordinating or managing projects, monitoring or developing systems or contributing to committees.

Women mentioned, among other things, initiating change in service delivery, teaching practice, accounting and budgeting. A few mentioned their role in addressing gender issues. Some trained, supported and mentored staff, and developed procedures and programmes to enable skill and career development.

Participants delivered and designed learning programmes, developed new learning programmes, or supervised final-year and postgraduate students. Less frequently, respondents referred to their involvement in research. Conducting research and supervising researchers were seen by a few as leadership, but more commonly interviewees talked about activities with a wider focus such as seeking funding and serving on ethics, award-making or REF committees. The apparent tendency to be more reticent to identify research-related work and achievements in comparison with teaching activities could reflect the sector imbalance where female academics spend proportionately more time on teaching than their male counterparts.

Although the visibility and impact of participants' leadership were not always clear, most participants seemed to do at least some work that affected their department or institution or beyond.

Institutional structures and practices: challenges and what needs to change

From the open-text part of the surveys, it is clear that many respondents wanted better career development practice including encouragement, mentoring and leadership training, to give fairer access to career opportunities. They also thought that they needed to be more confident.

A second overarching concern was the need to address the gendered nature of higher education institutions specifically and society generally. The responses indicate that while programmes such as Aurora and Athena SWAN are helping, genuine equal opportunity will only come about through cultural and structural change. These are longstanding issues and suggest that any shifts in the sector that are occurring, are slow-moving and not necessarily identifiable in the short term.

These issues are considered more closely below.

Career development, opportunities and progression

A lack of support from those above them was identified by a number of women. Women felt they were left to their own devices, that credit was often not given where it was due and that succession planning was ignored. This may suggest an issue with higher education institutions leaving staff to navigate careers and leadership in their own way. More specifically, respondents suggested that mentoring and women supporting other women could be helpful interventions. Aurorans in particular are acting on this themselves by engaging in and seeking more mentoring.

A commonly expressed wish was for more transparent recruitment and promotion criteria, for institutions to stick to the criteria they actually publish or to change criteria to reflect women's contributions. One respondent suggested that women invariably "played by the rules" while exceptions were made for male colleagues, "such as mysterious promotions at times of official promotion bans".

There was a feeling that access to promotion opportunities sometimes depended on contacts and relationships. One respondent commented: "You need to put a lot of time into influencing and knowing the right people which can be a distraction from developmental work".

Part-time and professional services staff, and to a lesser extent contract researchers, were seen as particularly disadvantaged. Working part-time was commonly cited as a reason for being unfairly excluded from leadership roles.

Women in academic roles overall had more negative responses than professional services women to statements around structural practices. This trend has also been found in other research.

Aurorans seemed to get to grips with institutions' promotion criteria and processes more easily than respondents who had not undertaken Aurora. As they were more likely to gain

promotion, Aurorans may well have developed a greater understanding of how it worked and what they needed to do. Alternatively, they may have been working in institutions or departments that had clearer guidelines, or they may have demanded more clarity from their institutions.

The evidence suggests that Aurora stimulates engagement in greater career self-management activity. As well as reporting engaging in more mentoring and coaching, Aurorans surveyed in October-December 2016 scored higher than they did when surveyed a year earlier on making themselves visible to others who could help their career, seeking out new work contacts, setting career goals, and asking others for feedback. This was not the case for the comparison group.

Equal opportunities

For both Aurorans and the comparison group, agreement with the statement "men have better chance than women of attaining leadership roles" is diminishing over time. Similarly there was higher agreement in the repeat survey with the statement that 'women are appropriately represented on major decision making bodies'. This finding accords with other research that things are moving in the right direction. However, while the situation is improving there is still some way to go. Women in different roles may have different experiences; the study shows lower agreement with the statement at both time points from academic respondents than from professional services respondents.

For some women, gender equality was not the only issue: class and ethnicity were also mentioned. One woman suggested that unconscious bias training was needed for all staff groups.

Although only occasionally mentioned, engagement with the Athena SWAN Charter was regarded as positive and successful when institutions were genuinely committed.

Gendered attitudes and structures

Men's apparent beliefs about women and the predominantly male culture of higher education were pinpointed as key barriers. Men were seen as not taking women seriously and as stereotyping women in particular roles. Women in the survey talked of a "laddish culture" in labs and of male

colleagues automatically thinking and commenting that their research was "fluffy".

Gendered attitudes, particularly around the competing demands of motherhood and career, were seen as problematic. Participants encountered stereotyping, gendered language, and the devaluing of 'soft, feminine' skills.

However, men were not always seen as 'the problem': women sometimes belittled other women or blocked their progression. A few participants made a point of saying they had not encountered sexism and that gender was not an issue.

Respondents thought that to change male attitudes, men need to be recruited as allies to challenge the culture of the workplace. It was felt that if men could be encouraged to take on more domestic responsibility it would help to normalise regard for work/life balance.

For some respondents, the ingrained societal belief that men make better leaders formed the foundation on which the gendered culture and structure of higher education institutions was built.

Childcare, flexibility and managerialism

The need for more formal childcare and/or affordable childcare was not frequently raised as enabling successful engagement in leadership. However, respondents did think that institutions could adopt a more family-friendly approach and be more supportive of both men and women with domestic arrangements, which would in turn help women with caring responsibilities to engage in leadership. The main concern was to enable women to have a career and a family without sacrificing one for the other.

Women wanted institutions to adopt a more flexible approach to working hours and location of work, without this negatively impacting on careers. They thought institutions paid lip service to flexible working and assumed that leadership and management could not be done part time, according to respondents.

The managerialist approach, where masculine leadership style were rewarded and a long hours culture prevailed, needed to change. One respondent's assessment was stark: "If the price for engaging in leadership is not seeing one's

children growing up, or not having time for other things beside work, it loses much of its appeal."

Many women wanted to see a greater diversity of leadership styles, a move away from the norm of aggressive leadership and greater value placed on 'feminine' styles.

Work allocation was also seen as discriminatory, with women being given more of the least valued administrative work. One respondent suggested using workload models to promote and audit more equitable work allocation. However, some wanted to see all work, skills, experience and contributions -- whether research, teaching, administration or professional services -- to be valued. The status of professional service staff relative to academics was seen as a particular concern.

Women's confidence

As well as identifying the need for change in institutional and societal culture and structures, many respondents thought that women themselves needed to display more confidence in their abilities as leaders. One described confidence, or the lack of it, as "the single biggest hurdle".

Lack of confidence variously affected women's willingness to pursue opportunities, challenge others, network and be selective about the work they agreed to do.

There is some evidence to suggest the Aurora programme can help here. Aurorans (but not the comparison group) scored slightly higher this year than last on a number of self-reported leadership skills and activities, most of which are to do with assertive action and which imply a good level of self-confidence. Aurorans increased markedly over the year in the extent to which they reported intending to seek a new job in the next year, and that they felt confident to put themselves forward for career advancement and for positions of responsibility.

Acknowledging lack of confidence as a barrier, especially if it is one's own confidence, might be seen as a first step to conquering it. Given the perceived institutional barriers, this in itself might not have much beneficial effect, but it might help to reduce the extent to which self-blame inhibits women, and encourage them to take on roles that have

historically been characterised and enacted in predominantly masculine ways.

What is perceived to be working? What is seen as making a difference?

Despite some interviewees and diarists seeing themselves as hindering their own progress in certain respects, most also gave themselves credit for their successes. Participants helped themselves by seeking to gain skills, qualifications and experience. Several had completed, or were working towards, professional qualifications or PhDs, and a few had sought out their own mentors. Volunteering, especially for committees, helped them to gain confidence develop communication skills and increase visibility.

A range of approaches to managing their working lives and careers were outlined. Some respondents strategically selected activities that overlapped with other work, aligned with their career goals and /or were compatible with home life. Others were pragmatic, detached and reflective about challenging experiences. A few referred to bringing gendered attitudes to the attention of others in meetings and workshops.

In some instances, line managers, and to a lesser extent other senior staff, helped women to progress by trusting them, recognising their skills and providing challenging opportunities. One participant referred to being 'incredibly fortunate' in having senior staff who 'helped my career no end'. Some participants referred to mentors who were role models, or encouraged, challenged and sponsored them.

The survey data show a relationship between a higher likelihood of promotion and participation in Aurora. Respondents were asked whether they had changed jobs or tried to do so in the last year. Aurorans were statistically significantly more likely than the comparison group to report that they had indeed done so, for more seniority (32% vs 15%), more responsibility (31% vs 12%), and to expand their skills (36% vs 25%), but not for more money (22% vs 18%). Of course Aurora women may well have been more "career-minded" in the first place but a clear link between completing the programme and the likelihood of promotion is established.

In both the 2015-16 and 2016-17 surveys, Aurorans were asked directly about how they thought Aurora had affected them. Cohort 3 was more likely than previous cohorts to say Aurora had increased clarity about what they wanted from their career, though less likely to say Aurora had increased their active development of a career support network.

Some women reported that Aurora increased their active engagement with workplace culture and systems. However, this was not the majority, and was less marked than most other perceived effects of Aurora. Other research has highlighted women's discomfort with engaging in politics, but also emphasised the necessity of doing so in order to be visible and to progress.

There is a clear overall message that the perceived effects of Aurora do not decline over the year to 18 months after completing Aurora. Indeed, in the case of the longitudinal comparison for cohort 2, it appears that some effects increased, most notably to do with engagement and confidence in leadership roles, being seen as a leader, and clarity about career goals. In contrast, developing one's career network was less likely to be seen as an effect of Aurora as time goes on.

Comments from the open-ended question at the end of the post-Aurora survey also suggested that for some, Aurora was making a difference. One participant said it had "emboldened" her to seek out new opportunities. Another had changed her mind about abandoning academia after the programme helped her see paths for future development.

Aurora helped many respondents to recognise their values and strengths, feel differently about themselves and to pursue leadership opportunities and career progression which they might not otherwise have done.

Conclusions

Women clearly feel they have the skills to take on leadership roles but there are barriers which prevent this belief from being realised. While more women are undertaking leadership and governance roles in higher education, men still dominate at the top. Women in the survey highlighted the preponderance of gendered attitudes, and a male culture where opportunities for women to access and achieve leadership responsibilities were curtailed and their work and contribution undervalued.

For some, inflexible and unsupportive structures, long hours and the masculine management style that is in place make the pursuit of leadership unattractive. Women also acknowledge personal barriers which hinder their career progression, namely a lack of confidence in promoting their own talents and in challenging the status quo.

However, it is important to avoid "blaming the victim" here. On the whole, respondents in this study have consistently identified features of organisational culture and practices as the main inhibitors of their progress and of opportunities to access and prosper in leadership roles. If they lose confidence and feel reluctant to put themselves in the firing line, it seems important to respond by adjusting features of the workplace so that these responses are less prevalent. To illustrate this general point, women who feel that they are making progress highlight the importance of mentors, encouragement from line managers and the impact of training. The evidence suggests the Aurora programme has a positive impact. Aurorans are more likely to seek and gain promotion and more likely to report taking steps towards leadership responsibilities than their female counterparts who have not been involved in the programme.

In recognition of the systemic constraints reported by academic and professional services women in higher education, we make thirteen recommendations to organisations, and just four to women.

Recommendations aimed predominantly at higher education institutions

1. Higher education organisations could consider providing more training in the key processes and roles in the organisation for academics (and women could consider enrolling for it!)

2. Higher education organisations could consider reviewing the job descriptions of part-time jobs with a view to increasing opportunities for leadership in them. In addition leadership roles could be offered on a part-time, job share basis.

3. Further development of women's support groups, networks and mentoring/coaching schemes should be considered so that (i) women in exposed and/or male-dominated roles are not isolated, and (ii) women can share experiences and learning, affirm each other's achievements and review their work strategies in order to enhance individual and collective self-efficacy.

4. Organisational initiatives to combat inequality should embrace the full range of ways in which people differ, not just with regards to gender. This is because placing gender relations in that wider context may stimulate more changes in thought and action.

5. Workload allocation systems should not only count hours, but also consider the likely rewards for, and prestige of, the activities performed in those hours. The distribution of low-reward low-prestige tasks between men and women should be audited.

6. In order to influence societal assumptions about the role of women, organisations in the higher education sector should seek wherever possible to ensure that women employees are able to play prominent roles in prestigious and externally visible activities.

7. Institutions need to give further consideration to ensuring that they do not only pay lip service to the importance of work-life balance, but also make it possible to be successful at work without sacrificing out-of-work commitments.

8. Higher education organisations might think further about ways of flexing time and location requirements in jobs, and communicating the acceptability of flexible working.

9. Institutions need to be ready to harness the learning and development that occurs on Aurora, and avoid using Aurora simply as a way of placating ambitious women.

10. Higher education organisations are encouraged to develop definitions and norms of leadership that include a broad range of skills and styles.

11. Institutions should examine how the requirements of senior leadership roles are interpreted and understood by those who undertake them and those who aspire to them, with a view to challenging elements that may make them (i) potentially harmful to everyone who does them and (ii) potentially differentially harmful and off-putting to some sub-groups of staff.

12. Consideration should be given to making an Athena SWAN award a necessary condition for the receipt of certain kinds of funding, such as RCUK grants or HEIF money.

13. A closer connection and more communication between Aurora, this project, and Athena SWAN should be initiated.

Recommendations aimed predominantly at women working in higher education

1. Women might take steps to ensure that their leadership activities go beyond quietly doing their jobs well, by engaging with other people and consciously making what they are doing visible to others, including influential people.

2. It is important for women to understand the informal influencing processes as well as the formal rules of their workplace, and consider engaging in them.

3. Women in higher education should ensure that mentors and managers know about their achievements and successes by telling them.

4. Professional services women and academic women might pair up to co-mentor, thus using their complementary know-how (e.g. professional services women's knowledge of how the organisation works, and academic women's career self-management strategies).

Key quotes

"Whilst I am still in the same position, albeit with new responsibilities, Aurora has emboldened me to seek out new opportunities. I am less afraid to indicate that I have leadership ambitions, and will apply for posts which interest me rather than put it off, because I assume there must be a more qualified candidate than me out there. Most significantly, it has encouraged me to seek promotion from SL to PL, something I have been putting off for a very long time." Survey respondent

"As we also found last year, women rate their leadership skills and behaviours quite highly on the whole, and -our data provide a variety of evidence for increases in their self-reported willingness to engage with power, assertive behaviour and self-promotion. However, they were also frustrated by the limitations on their agency imposed by institutional practices which were not as supportive as they would have liked. It seems to us, therefore, that changes in institutional practices and cultures are likely to be more necessary, and have more effect, than women changing themselves, even though this too has value." Research Team

"Aurora was extremely inspirational for me and gave me the self-believe that no one had ever given me in my career. Since then I am leading with other colleagues a group to support women in our Faculty, I am also informally mentoring various colleagues and have become involved in supporting women in my local community." Survey respondent

Key tables

Table 2: Frequency of key challenges mentioned in responses to open survey questions

Challenges	Frequency
Gendered Institutions	153
Women's low confidence	153
Unequal access to career development opportunities	135
Equality policy – practice gap	118
Career development practices	109
Gender stereotypes in society	77

Table 3: Survey data on perceived effects of Aurora

	% reporting that Aurora has increased this in Year 1 of study			% reporting that Aurora has increased this in Year 2 of study	
	Cohort 1	Cohort 2 (all respondents)	Cohort 2 (T2 respondents)	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
I seek out leadership roles	59	66	59	69	79
I demonstrate the people skills needed for leadership roles	59	63	63	65	66
I actively develop my career support network	61	59	59	38	47
I put myself forward for career advancement	56	55	51	58	59
I feel comfortable in positions of authority	54	52	44	57	59
I know what I want from my career	48	47	43	58	64
I engage in leadership at work that is not part of my job description/role	54	47	43	51	56
I act as a mentor at work	45	47	45	49	43
I communicate a clear vision of what needs to be done at work	42	43	39	38	45
I am decisive at work	36	38	31	37	42
Other people see me as a leader	35	37	35	51	43
I manage my work-life balance effectively	23	22	17	17	20
I openly challenge the systems and/or culture of my workplace	N/A	N/A	N/A	37	33
I find ways of turning the system and/or culture of my workplace to my advantage	N/A	N/A	N/A	34	41

Leadership Foundation comment:

This *Leadership Insights* paper reports briefly on the findings from the second year of a five-year longitudinal study, showing Aurorans' continuing positive perceptions of leadership and their reported "willingness to engage with power, assertive behaviour and self-promotion" in support of their career journeys. However, as the research team report, participants in the study – whether Aurorans or members of the comparison group – "were also frustrated by the limitations on their agency imposed by institutional practices which were not as supportive as they would have liked."

Engagement with the Aurora programme continues to rise, demonstrating ongoing demand for and interest in enabling women in higher education to achieve their potential and aspirations as leaders. However, what is clear is that, while Aurora can have a positive impact on participants, systemic barriers remain. As the team suggests: "changes in institutional practices and cultures are likely to be more necessary, and have more effect, than women changing themselves, even though this too has value".

It should be noted, too, that the study highlights that a focus on 'women leaders' can be too simplistic, given that many women identify with other characteristics that may also impact on their careers and perceptions of leadership (eg race, ethnicity, sexual orientation), rather than their leadership potential or capability. With our future merger with the Equality Challenge Unit in the creation of Advance HE, we have an opportunity to work further with the research team to understand these complexities as the study progresses.

We are committed to continuing to offer Aurora beyond the initial intention of five years to ensure that women in higher education have the opportunity to develop their leadership and careers (and to look beyond Aurora to further and wider development). However, the sector as a whole also needs to look to its own practices and cultures better to facilitate change. As part of our services to the sector, we are also committed to sharing 'what works' in this regard through surfacing and mobilising knowledge of good practice good practice and behaviours which have brought about culture change.

Vijaya Nath,
Director of Leadership Development

The Aurora 2018-19 dates will be announced in spring 2018 **www.lfhe.ac.uk/aurora**

This paper has been produced in collaboration with HEi-know, the HE intelligence platform from Media FHE Ltd.