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# Braving the bull: women, mentoring and leadership in higher education

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**ABSTRACT**

Global neoliberalism is allowing manifold social inequalities to intensify under the 'fair' and neutral language of the market. On the eve of International Women's Day 2017, the statue *Fearless Girl* was installed facing Wall Street's iconic *Charging Bull,* drawing to attention the ongoing gendered nature of these dynamics. Similar relations are transforming the field of higher education giving us pause to question implications for academic women. Using *Fearless Girl* as provocation, we critically consider our positionality as women involved in a mentoring programme once designed to redress underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions, now standardised to upskill a broad base of academics according to institutional benchmarks. Exploration of our subjectivities within a rapidly 'neoliberalising' milieu leads us to query if our formal mentoring programme can work in favour of gender equity. Questions to emerge for us raise broader questions about gender, mentoring and leadership in higher education.

## Braving the bull

We unite in this paper as mentor (Brabazon) and mentee (Schulz), women academics at a public Australian university brought together by a mentoring programme to support early career researchers seeking promotion, that is, academics in their first five years of tenure. A confluence of global events forms the backdrop to this union: inauguration of President Donald Trump in January 2017; the ensuing Women's Marches, which attracted an estimated seven million participants worldwide in support of women's and other human rights; the #MeToo and Time's Up Movements, which in 2017–18 cultivated substantial momentum in the global struggle against sexual abuse of women; and, coinciding with our first meeting, International Women's Day (IWD) 2017 with its provocation 'be bold for change', as manifested symbolically in *Fearless Girl* – the statue originally installed on Wall Street facing the iconic *Charging Bull* (Illustration 1).

The realisation of our mentoring relationship coincided with a worldwide cultural moment bringing questions of gender, diversity and equality sharply to the fore – issues we keenly discussed. Yet, the mentoring programme itself paid negligible 'formal' attention to questions of this nature, or to the impact of dynamics like gender on the

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**Illustration 1.** (Photo credit: Nudd 2017).

agency of individuals to meet institutional benchmarks for promotion. From the time of our first meeting, we consequently found ourselves drawing parallels (however thinly) between the positionality of *Fearless Girl* as proxy for women within male-dominated, market-oriented contexts and our own shared but distinct subjectivities as women in higher education under the mounting influence of neoliberalism.

A chief characteristic of neoliberal governance in Australia is the way in which neoliberal rationalities extend the economic realm such that subjects are positioned and locked into contractual relation with the state (Stratton 2011). This contract is characterised by a form of 'individualism', whereby diverse subjectivities are expected to be loyal to the state – or in our case, the neoliberal university – while disregarding other affiliations, such as gender. Put simply, neoliberal tropes discount the uneven impacts of social-structural conditions on population groups, advancing the belief that if individuals do not prosper within competitive neoliberal settings, blame must be apportioned to the individual alone.

Notwithstanding that her appearance on Wall Street was riven by controversy, *Fearless Girl* challenged this logic when casting light on the profoundly gendered nature of global markets. Her strategic placement relative to *Charging Bull* – known symbol of hegemonic masculinity and unfettered capitalism – co-opted the weight of IWD to pressure companies to add more women to their boards in a cultural milieu where 98 percent of the companies that make up the US stock market have no female board members whatsoever (Arce 2017). Within discourses of neoliberalism, details like these are papered over in favour of the assumption that those who do 'well' in such climates, are simply more talented or motivated *individuals*.

The parallels with our situation in academia are indirect, but worthy of consideration. For example, the mentoring initiative that brought us together was once designed to support 'women'. In its original formulation over a decade prior to our involvement, it was recognised that, while women comprised approximately half of all students and over half of all staff at our institution, they were negligibly represented in senior positions within the university structure, a pattern reflected in other Australian universities at that time, as well as in other Western countries (Gardiner et al. 2007). Women were recognised as a marginalised group and (notwithstanding the problematic way in which it attempted

to do so) the mentoring scheme was designed to redress their underrepresentation in senior roles.

Ten years later, and despite current research demonstrating that (white) men continue to constitute 70–74% of senior academics and executives in Australian tertiary institutions (including ours) while women remain clustered at lower levels (Blackmore 2015; Blackmore, Sánchez-Moreno, and Sawers 2015; Thornton 2013), mentoring at our institution is no longer framed in terms of gender equity. This is a point to be questioned considering the multiple metaphors still confronting women in academia: glass ceilings, glass cliffs, sticky floors, dead-end pipelines and leaky pipes. The mentoring initiative is now for early career researchers *generally*, and its curriculum focusses on upskilling individuals to meet university-wide performance indicators of audit and austerity; for instance, networking, time management, increasing research outputs, grant capture, and establishing a social media profile.

Participants partake in workshops of this nature as a group; the role of the mentor is to participate in one-on-one meetings with their mentee to enhance specific skills of this kind (albeit that there is scope for pairs to chart their own course, as illustrated by our decision to investigate gender equity). The assumption is that the profession in all its miscellany is 'logical and rational and all that is required is a guide to assist a decoding process' (Morley 2013, 125). Once decoded, the two key benchmarks for promotion – i.e. publication outputs in high impact journals, and winning competitive grants – should be readily achieved. These criteria are vaguely defined by the institution as pathways for proving academic excellence and leadership, and hence qualifying for promotion.

The transformation of our institution's mentoring initiative has occurred as the university has undergone broader neoliberal change. Features of the latter are not limited to our institution, but play out aspects of the neoliberalisation of higher education globally. Although fleshed out with greater detail in the following section, such characteristics include: the diversion of institutional capital into marketing, upper management salaries, and infrastructure while research, teaching and administrative support in many areas are starved (Cowden and Singh 2013); a change in overall tone as efforts to widen participation morph into competition for revenue (Molesworth, Scullion, and Nixon 2011); adherence to a 'politics of performativity' in which academic work is reduced to that which is 'numerically measurable' (Smyth 2017, 13), and moreover, 'marketable' (Thornton 2015); and the breakdown of academic solidarity by replacing a collegial culture with a commercial, competitive one. In short, higher education institutions in Australia and elsewhere are increasingly comporting themselves as entrepreneurial corporations and this has differential impacts on academics dependent on their location in the social and institutional structure.

This paper is not an inquiry into mentoring programmes under neoliberalism per se, and nor is it a detailed review of our institution's initiative. It is our initial attempt to illuminate aspects of our respective institutional subject positions and the structural impediments – *the bull* – consequently facing us as women at different points on the career ladder. Given that gender equity issues in academia are increasingly overlooked with the effect of compounding women's positional identities, we view the commitment of our stories to the public register as part of a collective process of rendering 'visible and therefore engag[ing] with and mak[ing] sense of the obstacles that are in place for female academics' (Savigny 2014, 794).

In what follows we explore the socio-political milieu framing us before considering aspects of the positionality of women academics in leadership, and then more specifically, early career women in structurally marginalised disciplinary areas (in this case, teacher education). These explorations give us pause to question, firstly, why women would bother aspiring for promotion, and secondly, the very real impediments to women in institutionally undervalued disciplines who nevertheless do. The questions to emerge for us indicate work now required so that mentoring, coaching and other formal and informal initiatives at our institution might stimulate structural change.

## Neoliberalism, gender and higher education

To appreciate the present moment in Australian higher education and the limits of initiatives such as mentoring, requires understanding the broader social and political context of neoliberalism that mediates gendered difference within and beyond the institution. Neoliberalism in Australia is not new. Beginning under the Whitlam Labor government of the 1970s with structural reforms that opened trade borders and lowered tariff barriers (Stratton 2011), a qualitatively different form of neoliberalism was set in train under the four conservative Howard-led Coalition governments (1996–2007), a time when government funding was progressively retracted from a broad range of social services, including public education.

This move fortified a shift in thinking concerning education: from public good (Reid 2013) to commodity (Connell 2013). Underlying this new order was a philosophy of individualism that recast social disadvantage and privilege in terms of the belief that *individuals* are ultimately responsible for themselves (Thornton 2013). The experiences of marginalised groups, such as Indigenous peoples, migrants, the homeless or poor could therefore be gradually conceptualised as 'individual failings' wedded to notions of deviance, defiance, deficit, lifestyle choice or welfare abuse (Stanford and Taylor 2013, 477). Not dissimilarly, gender dis/advantage could be (and is) eschewed by the meritocratic notion that individuals are rewarded based on objective and fair criteria (Henry 2000).

Throughout this period (i.e. from the 1980s but notably in the 1990s), public funding for universities declined (Forsyth 2015). Paradoxically, support for gender equity saw a marked increase in participation in higher education of female students and academics. Blackmore and Sawers (2015, 321) explain, 'women were encouraged to move into leadership positions in middle management (in roles such as Heads of School and Deans) through leadership programmes, mentoring and other formal strategies'. On one hand, moves toward corporatisation emphasised need for *individual* entrepreneurship, performance management, quality assurance and quantifiable outcomes. On the other, legislation such as the *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 (Commonwealth)* and *Employer of Choice for Women Award* recognised women *collectively* as warranting institutional and policy support (Winchester and Browning 2015). Discursively, 'equity, efficiency and effectiveness discourses jostled against each other uncomfortably as the system rapidly massified' (Blackmore and Sawers 2015, 321).

Decades of underfunding by governments coupled with strengthening of the aforementioned meritocratic discourses are resulting in what we are now seeing and which forms the backdrop to our mentoring relationship: the rapid scaling up of higher

education globally as universities transform into multinational corporations (Blackmore and Sawers 2015); intensified focus on branding, ranking and demand-driven online curriculum and industry partnerships (Blackmore 2015); emphasis on 'leadership' as a new buzz word, performance measure and organisational cure-all (Morley 2013); centralisation of internal power linked to external pressure and accountability frameworks (O'Connor 2015); rearticulation of education as 'individual positional good', export earner and source of revenue to be paid for by individuals (*customers*), not governments; and, as Thornton (2013, 131) says, 'a change in all the familiar discourses of the academy' as tropes concerning 'competition', 'audit culture' and 'workforce casualisation' permeate our collective lexicon and alter workplace structural relations while the pursuit of knowledge for social justice is trumped by instrumentalism.

This retraction of government spending for higher education continues to have several consequences. Among them, universities have become 'harsher' (Blackmore, Sánchez-Moreno, and Sawers 2015, vii) following aggressive moves to scale global rankings. Despite the existence of a 'veneer of equality' – the very fact of which enables subtle forms of discrimination to flourish (Teelken and Deem 2013, 520) – this has vindicated steady abandonment of equity agendas, reference to which is being subsumed by supposedly 'neutral' discourses of excellence, rankings, leadership, impact and quality (Blackmore, Sánchez-Moreno, and Sawers 2015, v; Herschberg, Benschop, and van den Brink 2018) – the same language framing our programme.

This in turn has triggered fortification of the cultural impediments facing women when seeking to re/position ourselves strategically to rise the ranks by proving our 'excellence'. As shown by van den Brink and Benschop (2012), 'excellence' is nevertheless a gendered category filled with sexist assumptions rather than clear, verifiable criteria, which is thus one of the proliferating impediments to women's advancement in higher education under the weight of neoliberalism.

Blackmore, Sánchez-Moreno, and Sawers (2015) argue, workplace culture is now 'less' about women-friendly environments than it is about 'entrepreneurial forms of leadership that revive modern/traditional but always unequal social relations of gender' (vii). Women cannot be homogenised. Yet, notwithstanding intersectionality, lack of proportional representation of all women in leadership and decision-making positions worldwide cannot be ignored (Aiston and Jung 2015, 205; Blackmore 2015, 184; Blackmore, Sánchez-Moreno, and Sawers 2015, v; O'Meara and Stromquist 2015, 338). As Morley (2013, 121) stresses, women's underrepresentation in leadership in higher education spans diverse socioeconomic and political contexts.

A second consequence of the gradual retraction of government funding for universities is the intensification of academic labour along gender lines. Blackmore (2015, 179) states, markets are gendered and do not make existing social divisions disappear. Inside the marketised university, traditionally gendered divisions of labour see women concentrated in education, humanities, arts, social sciences, health and social work – areas afforded increasingly less academic 'prestige' (Aiston and Jung 2015, 206) or 'capital' (both literally and figuratively) than the traditionally male-dominated domains of science, technology, engineering and maths, which are more amenable to quantification and industry partnerships (Blackmore 2015, 190; Blackmore, Sánchez-Moreno, and Sawers 2015, iv). Inside these divisions, women occupy the far majority of junior or casual academic roles while assuming greatest responsibility for teaching (O'Meara and Stromquist 2015, 338;

Teelken and Deem 2013, 529). Blackmore and Sawyers estimate that now in Australia, 'men dominate senior positions making up 72.7% of senior lecturers, 67.7% of associate professors, and 72.7% of professorial roles ... whereas women 30–54 years old remain clustered at Level B in lecturer positions' (2015, 326), that is, lowly lecturer positions with little chance for advancement.

Against this backdrop, we found ourselves questioning the adequacy of the mentoring initiative in which we were involved to influence career trajectories along gender lines, particularly when its formal focus (and that which mentees are uniformly judged against) is 'upskilling' individuals to meet standardised performance indicators while broader sources of inequality are ignored. Like the diminutive *Fearless Girl* facing down the 7,000-pound *Charging Bull,* we wondered if mentoring was futile. Before discussing this dilemma, we turn to an examination our positionalities as women within the institution, first as 'senior leader' in a middle management role, and then 'early career academic' in a school of education. These investigations provide scope for later grappling with the question, 'why mentoring'? The following section starts by reflecting on recent events at a Western Australian university, using this discussion as a vehicle for considering the complexities of leadership for women in higher education.

## Velcro women

Tara Brabazon, one of the authors of this paper, occupies a glass cliff position. This is a middle management role, on contract, that offers some seniority. Soft power is traded for short-term job security. The glass cliff posts have a great view, but within a few years the occupier of this space is forced off the cliff. They may either withdraw before the conclusion of the contract to another transitory post or – if unable to find another position – jump off the cliff to un(der)employment. The following image captures the nature of the glass cliff (Illustration 2):

When women are granted positions of power, this typically means being placed in difficult institutions in difficult situations, with heavily circumscribed capacities to generate change. For example, currently the Vice Chancellor of Murdoch University in Perth Western Australia is a woman. She replaced a man who was investigated by the Western Australian Corruption and Crime Commission. The departing Professor was investigated after an array of irregularities, oddities and stupidities were brought to light including regular visits to adult – but legal – websites (CCC 2016). What is startling about the CCC's findings is that the Commission was surprised by the behaviour of senior managers in universities. The investigation revealed a pattern of patronage, including jobs bestowed to friends and acquaintances, interventions in short lists and managerial excesses through entertainment expenses.

The former Vice Chancellor responded publicly by confirming it was and is 'standard practice' for Vice Chancellors to interact with prospective appointees (Higgott 2016). When a phrase is used like 'standard practice', or 'everyone does this', a technique of neutralisation is activated to justify questionable behaviour (Sykes and Matza 1957). 'Everyone' does not watch pornography or squander corporate funds. The point being made by the departing Vice Chancellor – that was not lost on higher education journalists (see *Campus Watch* 2016) – is that he was not a 'bad apple'. Rather, his behaviour aligned with cultural norms.

**Illustration 2.** Here is the nameplate of Tara Brabazon, Dean of the Office of Graduate Research, which confirms her seniority and status. Yet behind this supposed power lies the challenge of this post. Brabazon's name is attached to the wall with Velcro; it can be removed with ease and speed. That is the nature of glass cliff posts.

Neoliberalism – in its many permutations – maintains two principles: deregulation, removing 'the state' from moderation and management of a 'public good', and marketisation, ensuring that private corporations and businesses compete with as few legal and governance restrictions as possible. At Murdoch University, these two forces are channelled through Mr David Flanagan, Chancellor of the University who triggered and fuelled the investigations, and who was also the Managing Director of Atlas Iron. In 2014, he was awarded the Western Australian of the Year and Western Australian Business Leader of the Year. One year later, the profits and fortunes of Atlas Iron declined sharply. In response, Mr Flanagan increased his own remuneration and reduced the salaries of all other board members (Sprague and Ingram 2015).

Through all the turmoil during his chancellorship and the problems confronting Atlas Iron, Mr Flanagan was re-instated for another three-year term at Murdoch. It is difficult to imagine a university confronting a more damaging series of events. The Vice Chancellor was reported to the CCC. Yet the Chancellor was renewed for a three-year term. An academic leader of a university was removed from office. A mining chief executive remained at the University. The starkness of these tumbling decisions 'has raised questions on the authenticity of leadership behaviour and style' (Mehta and Maheshwari 2013, 3). Such behaviours are not only personally damaging, but shred organisational culture, branding

and profile thus requiring image maintenance in their wake in the context of a higher education market.

Such decisions are also gendered. White, Bagilhole, and Riordan (2012) suggest that Vice Chancellors in Australia continue to be recruited from a narrow base: 'typically career academics, mostly male and their profile [is] changing towards becoming chief executive officers in an increasingly competitive environment' (295). Market-derived principles aligning with this environment undermine those of gender equity (Lipton 2015), thus the shift to neoliberal managerialism 'has entrenched the gendered character of university power relations' (Lafferty and Fleming 2000, 265). Winchester and Browning concur that the 'leaky pipeline' 'loses more women than men' (2015, 280), but the under-representation of senior women in Australian universities cannot merely be attributed to poor or erratic decision-making, or even the absence of gender equity policies in universities, it is 'a deep-seated cultural issue requiring cultural and generational change' (Winchester et al. 2006, 519).

In the case of Murdoch University, a woman was hired as Vice Chancellor when the institution's brand was damaged. In August 2017, Vice Chancellor Eeva Leinonen then terminated the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (the democratically negotiated wage and working conditions of employees) (Berry 2017). A woman Vice Chancellor was used as a Trojan horse to remove one mode of leadership and install an aggressive neoliberal ideology. The notion that women, by virtue of gaining senior leadership positions, have the capacity or will to create gender equitable change in organisations increasingly typified by hard-line economics is thus a misreading of the higher education context (White 2017, 71). What is clear from White's research is being a woman is not enough to instigate change. Being a feminist proactively increasing the quantum of senior female staff is key; however, there are oftentimes penalties for those agitating for political change (Monroe et al. 2008), and 'organisational structures and cultures play powerful roles in shaping agentic possibilities' (O'Meara and Stromquist 2015, 340). As Lipton (2015, 61) reminds us, the capacity for women to dismantle the 'master's house' using the 'master's tools' remains at the heart of feminist debate.

Women's status in leadership in higher education is thus loaded with complexity and Brabazon's glass cliff post is no exception – (a reality that makes 'mentoring' challenging when we are honest about the environment we are expected to mentor women mentees into). Women have been reaching middle management 'glass cliff' positions at the point when universities are pondering their purpose beyond credentialing the future under-employed. In aiming to make sense of women's under-representation in senior leadership positions, researchers can return to the argument about women's 'caring' responsibilities, and indeed research does confirm the significant impact of the household on women's working lives across the career span (Probert 2005). However, both the authors of this article – like many women in higher education – do not have children and not all women exist in traditional domestic configurations that reproduce binary roles. Therefore, 'caring' responsibilities do not necessarily apply and cannot be used as wholesale excuse for exclusion or marginalisation (Armenti 2004; Morley 2013). Others must be found.

These other variables cluster in the ideological crevice aligning femininity with excellence, accountability, competence, leadership, or other 'industry benchmarks' (Smyth 2017). Put simply, a man can dress himself in the coat of a leader given the enduring character of homophilic relations (Brink as cited in White, Bagilhole, and Riordan 2012; Morley

2013, 123). Thus workplaces – including universities – are reproducing injustices in the guise of key performance indicators, promotion criteria and selection benchmarks (Lipton 2015).

The Head of School or Department is a vexed position. Women in these roles are not so much limited by a glass ceiling, but squashed between a microscope's glass slides. They occupy the housework posts of university management, the lowest rung of 'senior management' with little autonomy, agency or the possibility for innovation (Skelton 2005). Women in less senior positions might be sheltered from these pressures, and indeed, may not be aware of what they aspire to when aiming for promotion. Nonetheless, their positionality remains as riven and must be taken into consideration when contemplating the adequacy of formal mentoring schemes to assist their promotion. We must also consider the toll on women leaders when asked to assume the role of mentor.

## Desperate housewives

Mentees involved in our institution's formal mentoring scheme now draw from a broad base. They comprise different genders, nationalities and ages and represent different disciplinary domains. All are early career academics aspiring to promotion; however, some are afforded more institutional support for research than others.[1] Some balance teaching with research, others work in research-only roles. The diversity of these social and institutional subject positions impact on individuals' capacities to meet (largely) standardised promotion criteria. It is beyond this paper to consider the breadth of positions assumed by early career women; however, as a starting point we consider co-author and early career lecturer Sam Schulz's balanced 'teaching-research' position, as a sociologist of education. By contextualising this narrative in the literature, its particularities speak to the situation of women in similar roles.

Here I transition to first-person in recognition of the critical tradition, which impels us to move from the margins to a more accountable stance within our writing and activism (Morley 2018). I entered teaching as a pathway to academia reluctantly. I did not grow up with a poor view of teachers, in fact, some of the finest people I knew toiled doggedly in the profession. Still, I was aware of the devalued place of teachers in Australian society and of women's location within this framework. For a white woman growing up in working class South Australia during the 1970s through 1990s, teaching was, nevertheless, a structurally viable option.

People had long suggested I was cut out for teaching – a common refrain that reduces structural considerations to individual 'personality' or 'calling'. To 'become' (Green and Reid 2008) a teacher in this sense is to activate a network of normative modes of regulation that are shaped by relations of gender, class and race, which are co-active in constructing 'white' people as natural teachers and white women teachers as 'naturally caring' (Weber and Mitchell 1996).

To disrupt this stereotype, we might question why the process of becoming a teacher is predominantly if 'naturally' restricted to whites? Indeed, in Australia, the far majority of our undergraduate and in-service teachers draw from the white, Anglo-dominated mainstream despite Australia being a highly multicultural nation (Walton et al. 2018). We might also query why, across multiple sectors of the field, men continue to lead while women teach; a question that is pertinent within the context of higher education

where white female academics are paradoxically located at the crossroads between gender subordination and race privilege.

Inside the school where I work, it takes only a cursory glance at our staffing profile to observe a long-held association of teaching with whiteness and hegemonic femininity – observations that are not intended here to be generalisable, though they share striking correlations with the broader sociology of education (Schick 2000). White women academics assume the lion's share of responsibility for large undergraduate cohorts of pre-service teachers. These numbers rose markedly under Australia's widening participation agenda, and are now resulting in cramped tutorial rooms headed by lower-waged (usually female) academics or casual staff, who struggle to cater equitably for escalating student numbers (Cowden and Singh 2013).

Inside this new paradigm of performativity, learning is increasingly aligned with skills acquisition over critical intellectual work (hence extinguishing the will to critique), while the imposition of standardised metrics works to reduce the complexity of teaching and learning to quantifiable measures of individual 'output' (Riddle, Harmes, and Danaher 2017). Similar metrics are used to calculate academic performance, and these indicators are linked to the formal mentoring scheme to which I signed up in hopes of gaining support to advance to 'senior lecturer' position.

With respect to promotion, key criteria include research output (i.e. publications in high impact journals) and grant capture (i.e. winning outside funds) along with proving research impact – a concept that is difficult to quantify and ethically problematic when reduced to market concerns. And while there is an argument to be made that academics should be accountable to such criteria given their ties to the performance measures of universities domestically and internationally, among other issues, countless aspects of our professional (and personal) lives as academics are overlooked when it comes to measuring our performance against standardised benchmarks.

For instance, with larger student numbers in teacher education comes heightened pressure to engage in pastoral care – a situation that is currently going hand in glove with escalating mental health concerns amongst Australian youth (Headspace Australia 2017), while paradoxically, upper management seek to reduce our workload allowance per student. Pastoral care – or the need to individually negotiate aspects of students' personal lives that necessitate counselling, tailored education plans, alternative modes of assessment, or assignment extensions (Hearn et al. 2006; Lu 2018) – can and does absorb considerable amounts of time and emotional labour, especially with respect to cohorts as large as 500 or more.

These numbers are common in undergraduate teacher education but contrast markedly with those managed by more senior academic staff, such as the male-dominated professoriate, who typically work with small numbers of research higher degree candidates (Acker and Dillabough 2007). Research higher degree students tend to be more mature, thus the capacity to decouple university teaching at this level from an extension of mothering or caring – what Rubin (1981) in the US context calls academic 'momism' – is arguably greater (Lu 2018, 87).

Labour in the form of pastoral care is not adequately (if at all) captured in workload calculations, hence advancing the harmful impression to promotions committees that academics caught in this bind – *squashed between a microscope's glass slides* – simply have not used their time wisely if research outputs suffer. At one end of this bind, teacher

educators in balanced roles must wrest time from their teaching or other areas of life to produce research outputs – research that requires time to think, read, write, investigate, analyse and edit (Acker and Armenti 2004; Mountz et al. 2015). At the other, they must attend to student needs, which are escalating, often immediate, and increasingly loaded with expectations about how much time they ought to be afforded 'as consumers' (Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018).

But student expectations are not only mediated by consumption-production relations of neoliberalism (Bunce, Baird, and Jones 2017), students come to university with raced, classed and gendered expectations about teaching, and about their teachers –educators whose identities are already circumscribed by stereotypes pervading the 'teaching profession' that position teaching as 'women's work' (Cammack and Phillips 2002). These normative cultural expectations manifest in student evaluations of teaching (SETs), wherein harsher critique can be aimed at female academics if they transgress students' expectations. Sprague and Massoni (2005) argue that greater hostility is directed toward women than men academics who transgress students' gendered norms. They explain:

> … students' gendered expectations place burdens on both men and women teachers, but the burdens on women are likely to be far more consuming of time and energy. […] That is, women teachers may be called on to do more of what sociologists call emotional labour, labour that is frequently invisible and uncounted. Thus, if teachers are being held accountable to, and are attempting to meet, gendered standards, then women and men may be putting out very different levels of effort to achieve comparable results. (2005, 779)

My own SETs frequently return high scores with student comments cohering around notions of 'approachability', 'feedback' and 'support', in addition to highlighting the extent to which their involvement in the critical topics I teach has gradually enabled them to appreciate that society is *not* fair, that education *is* a site of inequality, and that *socially equitable* modes teaching and learning cannot be reduced to multiple choice tests or standardisation (the forms of assessment and delivery that we as teacher educators are, ironically, being ushered toward by university managers for the sake of productivity).

In practice, constructing, delivering and assessing transformative modes of education of this kind demands enormous amounts of time, stress and flexibility, especially if we are to be viewed as 'approachable' and 'supportive'. Students must be assisted through the difficult process of reflecting on 'their own privileges and positions along various axes of oppression' (Mott et al. 2015, 1263), which invariably results in resistance prior to transformation (Motta 2013). Compounding the situation is that the 'neoliberal university requires high productivity in compressed time frames' (Mountz et al. 2015, 1236), while neoliberal restructuring has reduced our teaching profile to 'a core of permanent, tenured staff and many part-time staff [which] puts increased pressure on that core of tenured staff and impoverishes the working conditions of part-time staff' (Currie, Harris, and Thiele 2000, 289).

In my situation, and mine is not unusual, I am left to teach cohorts of up to 150 students independently in addition to supervising doctoral and honours students, undertaking teaching rounds (i.e. visiting schools to assess student-teachers' performance), engaging in research and community service, and managing mounting layers of administration. Coser argues, universities are 'greedy institutions', 'their demands on the person are

omnivorous' (as cited in Currie, Harris, and Thiele 2000, 270). But if I want students to learn for the sake of greater social equity because, after all, students who pass through my topics end up impacting the broader community, I must care enough to engage, and care translates into time.

For Lu (2018, 89), although this situation is complex, there is often an 'implicit but persistent tie between care, emotion and womanness in the university context', which reveals itself in the common cultural expectation that women academics will spend more time and effort responding to student needs. In short, 'there seems to be a leeway for males to choose to care or not' (76), which habitually relegates women academics in teacher education to institutional mother and 'housewife' – desperate for time, and tired of the expectation we will carry the institutional load (Acker and Dillabough 2007; Sprague and Massoni 2005). This presents women academics in schools of education with a bind: if we spend time meeting the proliferating expectations and demands associated with rising student numbers, this can result in positive SETs and (potentially) valuable student learning. Yet, this labour will invariably come at the expense of time for research, leadership, grant capture or career-life balance. If mentoring schemes are to 'help' academics in this circumstance, then they must acknowledge the crippling situations that many academic women face.

## Why mentoring?

If the 'bull' to which we refer in the title of this paper relates to gendered structural impediments facing academic women who wish to gain promotion or lead with integrity, then any mentoring scheme will be hard-pressed to subvert it. The brief explorations into our respective positionalities unfolded here are knowingly limited. They require additional research (*and time*) to explore and nuance the claims we have made, and yet, they open a window onto aspects of academia that warrant serious attention at our institution, if not at others. Moreover, these stories contribute to a growing matrix of legitimate criticisms of women's experiences in higher education at a time when there is dire need for 'transnational feminist analysis, pedagogy and social foment' (Campbell and McCready 2014, n.p.).

We have argued that teaching-heavy academic roles mitigate against women's capacity to produce research, and this is true in many areas of academe. This situation has serious consequences for promotion given that promotion systems are overwhelmingly weighted in favour of research (Aiston and Jung 2015, 206; Thornton 2013, 133). Teaching, in contrast, might be viewed as 'the new housework' (O'Connor 2015, 311) – work that is neither valued nor afforded adequate workload allowance given the considerable time and emotional labour required to engage in increasing levels of pastoral care (Aiston and Jung 2015; Blackmore 2015; Savigny 2014; Thornton 2013).

We can add that 'quality' research is now almost exclusively defined by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) framework, 'an assessment system that evaluates the quality of the research conducted at Australian universities' (Australian Government 2015). This framework favours 'male-dominated' forms of quantitative research drawn from the 'hard' scientific, material or biological sciences (Blackmore 2015, 184; Blackmore and Sawers 2015, 327; Lipton 2015). Thus, education research tends not to score well by this measure (Blackmore 2015, 187), let alone *critical* research that challenges dominant

epistemological and methodological paradigms, and is far from amenable to industry partnerships (Amsler 2014; Blackmore and Sawers 2015, 327; Campbell and McCready 2014; Morley 2018; Thornton 2013).

Women academics undertaking critical research while managing high teaching loads are thus particularly at risk of burnout (Blackmore 2015, 188), and of being passed over for promotion. Women who *are* promoted to leadership and decision-making roles within this context occupy a position that is ambivalent and emotionally exhausting given the need to navigate considerable organisational pressure (O'Connor 2015, 309). 'Gender equity' is unlikely to be an area of concern to most of those in power given its invisibility to those who can take it for granted (Yates as cited in O'Connor 2015, 314). Thus, even for women leaders who may wish to use their position to effect equitable change, their agency to do so is circumscribed by normative images of leadership and male-dominated cultural values (Blackmore, Sánchez-Moreno, and Sawers 2015, vi). Women mentees involved in mentoring programmes designed to support their ascendancy through the institutional ranks might therefore question, why bother? Likewise, for women mentors, mentoring involves 'substantial emotional labour and has the potential for affective overload' (Morley 2013, 125).

We nevertheless chose to use our mentoring relationship to discuss these issues head on in light of their expansive and urgent applicability, and moreover, to sustain the fire that drives us. van der Weijden et al. (2015) suggest that formal mentoring schemes *can* be useful when it comes to promoting women through the ranks. They show that 'young professors who receive mentorship on average have a more positive view on their work environment and manage their research more actively' (277). Arguably, these are neoliberal improvements that enmesh women into 'doing neoliberalism' (i.e. focusing on performance indicators, and 'not' questioning authority) in order to survive (McRobbie 2015). They are about assimilating 'women into dominant masculine corporate cultures' (McKeen & Bujaki in Morley 2013, 125). Formal mentoring in this regard can be a platform for suggesting that the problem of gender equity is located *within* women: if women could increase their confidence and networking, then they would be 'fixed' (Eliasson, Berggren, and Bondestam 2000; Morley 2013, 125). This is obviously problematic for obscuring social and institutional contexts and organisational culture of the kind we have highlighted, which constitute fundamental sources of inequality.

Looked at differently, Blackmore, Sánchez-Moreno, and Sawers (2015) suggest that 'women can work strategically to re/position themselves better through mentoring and networking; that is, "learning the rules of the game"' (iv). O'Meara and Stromquist (2015) contend that schemes like mentoring can provide 'intellectual and social support, and strategies to handle interactions and situations where women's voices are not being heard' (340). If cultivated, mentoring relationships can grow into peer networks such that, 'rather than individuals fighting battles alone, these groups [can] utilise shared experiences and advocate together as a stronger voice for campus-level awareness, policy reform, transparency, and accountability for gender equity outcomes' (355) – subtle forms of incremental collective, informal action (Monroe et al. 2008).

In its current design, our institution's formal mentoring scheme does not recognise women as a marginalised group; women's collective identity, or at least our shared challenges, are subsumed beneath the 'individual' and her quantifiable outputs. It thus does little to support the career progression of women, let alone rectify the 'patriarchal

dividend' (Connell 2002). However, it has provided space for critical dialogue (O'Meara and Stromquist 2015, 342) and it is receiving some institutional support. If we wait for formal recognition of gender equity problems in our present environment, it is likely we will wait forever. This leaves us with a question: to what extent are we prepared to develop the resources and connections currently available to us, however minimal, to be 'bold for change'?

## Bold for change

What does it mean to brave the bull of contemporary academia as women? Can mentoring really help? *Fearless Girl* is looking directly at *Charging Bull*: seeing the world for what it is and, potentially, acting in it for what it can be. Yet, the 'girl' in the title is significant. Women are not fearless. Women have been shamed, attacked, marginalised, humiliated, harassed, overlooked, over-worked, underpaid and assaulted. With the volatility of contract employment after the Global Financial Crisis, we feel the fear. Work is difficult to gain, and challenging to hold. Labour surplus has a profound impact on inequality and injustice. While feminist researchers can affirm the value of taking risks, subservience and submission guarantee low paying work in a time of few jobs; promotion is rewarded for conformity.

Acker and Armenti lamented over ten years ago,

> Academic women are not the wretched of the earth […] they are in extremely privileged positions. Yet if these women experience their lives as threaded with misery, what hope is there for other women who have not had their advantages? (2004, 18)

Higher education should lead rather than follow social change. What women academics really need from formal institutional mentoring, is for these programmes to recognise the myriad invisible and unaccounted for structural barriers to our success, and help us collectively dismantle them. If they *do not* do this – in other words, if formal schemes retain myopic focus on individuals' capacity to, for instance, apply for a grant or establish a social media profile – then the university is turning a blind eye to the ways in which it bolsters the patriarchal dividend. More studies of feminist-critical educational policy are imperative, and we must find ways to disseminate this information to a broader audience to reinvigorate the very purpose of higher education as fundamentally aligned with social justice. This paper offers a moment of that intervention. The goal is to ensure that women occupy leadership positions and naturalise power. Mentoring may help. Social justice will help more.

## Note

1. In some universities, early career academics in the male dominated hard sciences are afforded up to 40% of their workload to undertake research, their teaching loads are limited and they can apply for sizeable grants to establish a research profile. Those in areas such as teaching, the arts or humanities are afforded much less time or funding, hence why we infer that some early career academics are more 'desperate' than others for support.

## Disclosure statement

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