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Micro-political practices in higher education: a challenge to excellence as a rationalising myth?

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ABSTRACT
Excellence has become a ‘hoorah’ word which is widely used in higher education institutions to legitimate practices related to the recruitment/progression of staff. It can be seen as reflecting an institutionalised belief that such evaluative processes are unaffected by the social characteristics of those who work in them or their relationships with each other. Such views have been challenged by gender theorists and by those researching informal power in state structures. The purpose of this article is to raise the possibility that excellence is an ‘idealised cultural construct’ and a ‘rationalising myth’. Drawing on data from qualitative interviews with 67 men and women, who were candidates or evaluators in recruitment/progression processes in five higher educational institutions (in Ireland, Turkey, Bulgaria, Germany and Italy), it conceptualises and illustrates masculinist, relational and ‘local fit’ micro-political practices that are seen to affect such recruitment/progression. Variation exists by gender and by contextual positioning in the process (i.e. as evaluator/candidate). These practices illustrate the perceived importance of the enactment of informal power. The article suggests that the construct of excellence is used to obscure these practices and to maintain organisational legitimacy in the context of multiple stakeholders with conflicting expectations.

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KEYWORDS Candidates; evaluators; excellence; local fit; higher education; informal power; masculinist; micro-political practices; rationalising myth; relational

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Introduction

Excellence is often seen as the dominant logic in decisions about recruitment/progression in higher education. Implicit in this is the idea that excellence is unambiguous, gender neutral and unaffected by context. Thus, it effectively perpetuates Weber’s (1978) notion that organisations and their evaluative processes are unaffected by the social characteristics of those who work in them and their relationships with each other. Effectively, then it assumes that those involved are detached automatons, who make decisions solely based on what purport to be universalistic criteria. Such views have been challenged by gender theorists (Acker, 1990, 1998; Rismann & Davis, 2013) and by those concerned with informal practices and their relationship with state governance (Davis, 2017; Verloo, 2017). This article is concerned with identifying the micro-political practices related to recruitment/progression in higher education institutions (HEIs). It raises the possibility that excellence in such contexts, as in many other aspects of higher education (EC, 2004, EU 2012; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Nir & Zilberstein-Levy, 2006), has become a ‘hooray word’ (Whyte, 2005) which is widely used, entirely uncritically as an ‘idealised cultural construct’ (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 342) and a ‘rationalising myth’ (Nielsen, 2016).

For Van den Brink (2010, p. 25) micro-politics refers ‘to the strategies and tactics used by individuals and groups in an organisation to further their interests…. It includes a broad spectrum of ways in which people influence, network, collide, lobby, resist or use other personal strategies to effect or resist change or assert their own interests’ (see also Morley, 1999). In this article, we are concerned with informal power as reflected in micro-political practices. For Connell (1987, p. 61), a focus on practices facilitates an analysis of the ‘interweaving of personal life and social structure’. In this article, micro-political practices have been identified in respondents’ accounts and refer to actions, relationships or perceptions that are perceived as perpetuating the use of informal power in recruitment/progression.

There is evidence of the existence of gender-biased evaluations in academic contexts (EC, 2004; Husu, 2014; Nielsen, 2016; Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2012; Wennerås & Wold, 1997). Wennerås and Wold (1997) also identified nepotism (i.e. favouring protégés) in Swedish medical research evaluation panels. Subsequent academic references to this have been rare: the assumption being that it does not or at least should not exist. There is also evidence of the use of logics (other than excellence) such as ‘local fit’ (Lynch, Gummell, & Devine, 2012) or ‘inbreeding’ (Vázquez-Cupeiro & Elston, 2006; Sanz-Menéndez, Cruz-Castro & Alva 2013; Montes López, 2017). This article reformulates and illustrates these concepts drawing on existing research by the authors of this paper on five HEIs: one each in Bulgaria, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Turkey (Wolffram, Aye, & Apostolov et al., 2015). Wolffram et al. (2015) used a largely Bourdieuvian perspective to analyse constructions of excellence in these contexts, while O’Connor and O’Hagan (2016) highlighted variation in the content of excellence and described evaluative practices in one HEI.

The focus is on faculty appointments/progressions in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The concept of progression includes promotion involving competition against other candidates as well as evaluation against specific criteria. The STEM area is a predominantly male area, with women making up only 13% of those at Grade A (full professorial level) in the EU 28 as compared with 21% across all disciplines (EU, 2015). Thus, the overwhelming majority of those at full professorial
level in STEM (and overall) are men, although some variation occurs between the countries in which the case study HEIs are located (Table 1).

This article raises questions about the cumulative impact of micro-political practices in challenging assumptions about the gender-neutral nature of bureaucracies and the irrelevance of personal and political considerations to the evaluative processes involved in recruitment/progression. Although at first glance this appears radical, it reflects the idea that evaluations are ultimately cultural processes. As Van den Brink and Benschop (2012, p. 509) argue, ‘academic evaluations are not simply technical endeavors intended to measure the quality of academics; instead, they are political endeavors that involve negotiations between multiple actors’. Similarly, Lamont (2009, p. 19) suggests that ‘Evaluation is by necessity a fragile and uncertain endeavour’ that of necessity involves participants’ ‘sense of self and relative positioning’. If evaluation is affected by micro-political practices, it has potentially profound policy implications. It challenges the basis on which evaluative decisions are actually made and hence potentially the legitimacy of such evaluative processes in HEIs.

**Theoretical framework**

Myths are particularly important in institutions of higher education since legitimacy in such contexts is problematic because there is no clear definition of success and considerable pressures as regards public accountability (Deem, Hilliard & Reed, 2008). Multiple stakeholders, including the state, the taxpayer, industry, civil society and students, have very different and unreconciled expectations of higher education, and this makes the evaluation of success very difficult. In that context, ‘success depends on legitimacy acquired from conformity to macro-cultural myths’ (Hallett, 2010, p. 54; Scott & Meyer, 1983). Legitimacy is maintained by the enactment of meaningful material practices (Boltanski, 2011) which underpin such macro-cultural myths.

Early neo-institutionalists such as Meyer and Rowan (1977, p. 54) suggested that organisations must ‘maintain the appearance that the myths actually work’. With DiMaggio and Powell (1983), ‘new institutionalism’ became identified with an emphasis on legitimacy (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983) and was mainly concerned with the macro-level. This article draws particularly on ‘inhabited institutionalism’ with its focus on

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**Table 1. Drawing on EU (2015) data.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria (BG)</td>
<td>1.4 (1.25)</td>
<td>31.7% (26%)</td>
<td>NA (NA)</td>
<td>NA (NA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (DE)</td>
<td>1.45 (1.34)</td>
<td>17.3% (14.6%)</td>
<td>11.6% (9.8%)</td>
<td>7.6% (5.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey (TR)</td>
<td>1.25 (NA)</td>
<td>NA (28%)</td>
<td>NA (25.7%)</td>
<td>NA (19.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland (IE)</td>
<td>1.43 (1.46)</td>
<td>28.2% (26.5%)</td>
<td>20.7% (NA)</td>
<td>15.9% (NA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy (IT)</td>
<td>1.76 (1.73)</td>
<td>21.1% (20.1%)</td>
<td>21.6% (19.8%)</td>
<td>10.4% (9.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aThe higher the score, the thicker the Glass Ceiling; bEC (2015) gives both 2013 and 2010 figures. Both are included: 2010 in brackets; c21% of those at (full) professorial positions in Irish HEIs are women (3 years average 2014–2016 inclusive: HEA, 2017); dNA: not available. G. Irvine (personal communication, 2017) has accepted that the figures submitted to EU (retrospectively calculated for 2010 in EU 2015) were incorrect.
‘social interaction and local meaning’ and extends its focus on ‘intra-organisational gendered politics’ (Hallett, 2010, p. 66). It thus extends old and new institutionalism and looks at intra-organisational micro-political practices. Poggio (2010, p. 432) has stressed the situatedness of practices, i.e. the extent to which they are ‘actualised through social interaction and are embedded in situated contexts’, with Risman and Davis (2013) identifying cognitive biases and ‘Othering’ in these contexts. In focusing on micro-political practices in HEIs, we are concerned with informal power-related practices. Martin (2003, 2006) has differentiated between the dynamic aspect of such practices at an interactional level, and those aspects that have become consolidated into cultural stereotypes. In this article, micro-political practices refer to actions, relations and perceptions which reflect the operation of informal power and which are seen to impact on academic recruitment/progression. It includes ‘intra-organisational gendered politics’ as well as micro-politics involving other informal power bases, such as relationships with particular powerful individuals and/or perceived ‘fit’ with a wider group of power holders.

It is widely accepted that managerialism is an increasingly common ideology in higher education and one involving a focus on individualism, competition and enterprise (Lynch, 2014; O’Hagan et al., 2016). It has been suggested that excellence ‘can be conceptualised as a component of the ideological apparatus’, involving ideas about how formal structures and decision-making systems ought to be reshaped in this new managerialist context (Santiago & Carvalho, 2012, p. 513). The implicit normative assumption in the focus on excellence is that decisions about recruitment/progression are or should be meritocratic. In Scully’s (1997, p. 413) terms, a meritocratic system is ‘a social system in which merit or talent is the basis for sorting people into positions and distributing rewards’. However, Van Arensbergen, Van Der Weijden and Van Den Besselaar (2014, p. 218) noted that although decisions about the best and worst research applications were reasonably clear cut, differences in the middle were frequently very small, culminating in ‘rather arbitrary’ decisions affected by the context (example by the composition and behaviour of the evaluators).

In many western societies, women are devalued as women: this phenomenon being referred to by Connell (1987) as men’s patriarchal dividend; by Bourdieu (2001, p. 93) as women’s ‘negative symbolic co-efficient’ and by Ridgeway (2011, p. 92) as ‘a status inequality – an inequality between culturally defined types of people’. This differential valuation extends beyond individual men and women to ‘institutionalized’ patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one [i.e. women] as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem’ (Fraser, 2008 p. 58). Gender-biased evaluative assessments by men and women have been identified in experimental studies in the United States where increased transparency reduced but did not eliminate the preferential treatment of applications purporting to come from men (Foschi, 2004, 2006; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012). Double standards in the evaluation of professorial candidates have also been identified (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Wennerås and Wold (1997) found similar processes operating in the evaluation of research applications (see also Husu, 2014). The evaluation of the quality of the researcher has been shown to be particularly likely to be gender biased (Van Der Lee & Ellemers, 2015). Such gender bias is reflected in and reinforced by
processes such as stereotyping (Martin, 2006) and homosociability (i.e. the tendency to select people like oneself: Grummell, Lynch, & Devine, 2009).

It has been suggested that logics ‘prescribe what constitutes legitimate behavior’ and provide ‘taken-for-granted conceptions of what goals are appropriate and what means are legitimate to achieve these goals’ (Pache & Santos Insead, 2013, p. 973). Excellence is only one possible logic. Relational and local bases for allocating resources are in an ambiguous position. Wennerås and Wold’s (1997) identification of nepotism provoked considerable concern. However, sponsorship, although basically similar in having a relational basis, has a much more positive overtone, suggesting as it does the ‘normal’ grooming by senior men of junior men (through recommending them for positions and creating opportunities for them). Such processes, given the cultural devaluation of women, are likely to be gendered. There is also a taken-for-granted popular acceptance in many organisations of logics related to familiarity and loyalty reflected in concepts such as ‘local fit’ (Lynch et al., 2012) or ‘inbreeding’ (Vázquez-Cupeiro & Elston, 2006). Although they are officially disapproved of, micro-political practices involving them often persist at a departmental or faculty level where they are depicted as having a certain legitimacy. Again, given wider cultural processes, they are highly likely to be gendered.

**Methodology**

Case studies provide an opportunity to examine particular contexts in detail (e.g. Buzzanell & D’Enbeau, 2009; Lewis & Cooper, 2005) and, in this situation, enable a contextual understanding of evaluative practices related to recruitment/progression, with a specific focus on excellence. This study drew on data from 67 academics in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in HEIs in Bulgaria, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Turkey and was carried out as part of a wider EU-funded project. Respondents were roughly evenly divided between men and women (32 women and 35 men).

HEIs globally have become subject to similar pressures arising from the transnational flows of higher educational policy imperatives, with their stress on international ranking and other metrics (Deem et al., 2008; O’Connor, 2014; O’Hagan et al., 2016). HEIs high international ranking is typically associated with a strong focus on research output in international peer-reviewed journals. However, it is by no means clear that international policy pressures translate down into decision-making about recruitment/progression in HEIs. Indeed, since the recruitment process is frequently ‘owned’ by a department, the possibility of micro-political practices impacting on it cannot be eliminated. All but one of the universities included had a low international ranking (see Table 2), although they all have aspirations as regards strong research performance and would be unwilling to identify themselves as purely teaching institutions. The professoriate in all five of the HEIs was male dominated: both overall and in STEM. However, the proportion of women in the (full) professoriate, both overall and in STEM, was highest in the Bulgarian and Turkish HEIs: reflecting national trends in these countries (see Table 2).

The focus of the project was on STEM: a predominantly male area internationally. The organisations selected are similar in ways, although there is also some variation.
between them. Four of them are public universities: with implications for expected objectivity and transparency in the allocation of public resources. All four included a focus on STEM and all but one (i.e. the German HEI) were ranked relatively low on the QS global ranking system (Table 2). They varied in age, size and the salience of STEM. Two of the four HEIs were large old institutions, with a predominant STEM focus. The Turkish university is one of the oldest and largest of the state technical universities with 30,000 students and 2300 staff and includes 13 faculties, the majority in science and engineering. The German university is also one of the oldest and largest technical universities there with over 40,000 students and 9200 staff, and with six of its nine faculties in science and engineering. Two others were relatively new, much smaller public universities, with a less dominant focus on STEM. The Irish one, although it was established in the 1970s, only acquired university status in the late 1980s. It has roughly 13,000 students and 1300 staff, with science and engineering being one of four faculties. The Bulgarian university with 14,000 students and 1000 staff was founded as a branch of an older university in the 1970s. It has a College of Technical Science and the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science is one of its seven faculties. The Italian organisation is an outlier in that it is a very small non-profit research organisation with seven research centres divided into research units. It operates as a research foundation in technology, science and humanities. It provides funding to 88 PhD students and has 482 staff. Its inclusion facilitates an insight into the extent to which micro-political practices exist outside the public university system.

The intention was that evaluators and candidates would be chosen from three recent recruitment processes in each organisation: the evaluators being members of recruitment/progression boards and the candidates those assessed in such contexts. For various reasons, including confidentiality, this focus on three recent recruitment processes only occurred to a limited extent, i.e. in the Italian and to some extent the German and Irish organisations. Two recent progression rounds as well as a recruitment process were included in the Irish case study, with interviews with applicants in other competitions (i.e. candidates) and board members (i.e. evaluators) also being included (Table 2).

The data are mainly drawn from semi-structured, qualitative interviews and a small number of focus groups. Semi-structured interview guides facilitate an understanding of the depth and complexity of people’s accounts, acknowledging both subjective and objective elements. Interview guides were developed and agreed among partners. Candidates were asked ‘What criteria were used to assess candidates?’; ‘Do you think these criteria signify academic excellence?’ and ‘Are there other skills or qualities a candidate could possess which would signify academic excellence?’. Members of recruitment/progression boards

### Table 2. Organisational and respondent characteristics (at time of interview: 2012–13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Age and ranking (QS, 2017)</th>
<th>Percentage of women at (full) professorial level overall</th>
<th>Percentage of women at (full) professorial level in STEM</th>
<th>Number of respondents (M and F)</th>
<th>Status: Evaluators; candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IE New: 500–50</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7 M; 7 F</td>
<td>6 E; 8 C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Old: 146</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6 M; 7 F</td>
<td>5 E; 8 C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Research foundation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10 M; 4 F</td>
<td>9 E; 5 C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BG New: Unranked</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8 M; 10 F</td>
<td>5 E; 13 C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TR Old: 651–700</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4 M; 4 F</td>
<td>4 E; 4 C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were simply asked ‘How do you define academic excellence?’. Micro-political practices were not a specific focus but emerged spontaneously in response to a variety of questions such as ‘Has gender affected your career progression in a positive or negative way?’; ‘When you look back over your career what do you see as the critical points?’; ‘Is there any difference in the careers of men and women in the university?’. Interviews averaged one hour and were undertaken, tape recorded and transcribed by local researchers. Qualitative data analysis software was not available in all five languages, so manual data analysis was undertaken. The initial framework used was derived from Bourdieu’s field theory (Wolfram et al., 2015). Evaluative practices were identified in a content analysis of the Irish data and this frame was developed and then used across the other case studies. Respondents are identified in the text by a code which indicates the country in which they were employed (Turkey – TR; Bulgaria – BG; Germany – DE; Italy – IT; Ireland – IE), gender (male, female), contextual position (evaluator or candidate) and unique identifier number (starting 00). Identifying characteristics, including hierarchical position, are omitted in the interests of confidentiality since the proportion of women in such positions was low. No attempt is made to focus on national variation since only one organisation was included from each country. Furthermore, some respondents had not been born in that country: reflecting cross-national patterns of academic mobility that have been widely documented.

**Micro-political masculinist practices**

Masculinist micro-political practices include cognitive bias (the devaluing of women as women) reflected in double standards in evaluating their CVs or contributions (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2012), implicitly gendered stereotypes (Martin, 2006; White, 2014) and gendered homosociability (i.e. the tendency to select people like oneself: Grummell et al., 2009). References to such masculinist micro-political practices were common in respondent’s accounts, albeit with slightly different nuances.

Gendered cognitive biases were reflected in perceptions of the differential evaluation of the social contributions by men and women. Occasionally, this related to predominantly male progression boards, where women’s voices were seen as marginalised because they were women:

> It’s not what the woman says or what the man says. It’s the fact that it’s coming from [a man or a woman]. Its gendered . . . the person listening to it will automatically associate a positive connotation to whatever the man says and a less positive, less, just put it that way, to what the woman says. (IE, female candidate, 08)

References to gendered cognitive biases were also made by women in other HEIs: ‘Of course there is the danger that a woman is evaluated more critically just because of the social discrepancy, that she is given a less favourable assessment. That happened also to me a couple of times for sure’ (DE, female candidate, 12): ‘They prefer men even if the achievements of the candidates are equal’ (BG, female candidate, 16). Cognitive biases were also occasionally reflected in stereotypes focusing on women’s value as communicators rather than scientists. In this as in other studies (Currie, Thiele, & Harris, 2002; O’Connor, 2014), women emerged as more likely to refer to such gendered processes, although some women (as in Rhoton, 2011) claimed that no gender discrimination
existed. A female Turkish respondent, drawing on gender stereotypes, suggested that research was an appropriate job for women: reflecting a historical endorsement of academia as a suitable career for (middle class) women (see Healy, Özbilgin, & Aliefendioğlu, 2005). She implies however that even in that context, management might potentially be more problematic:

We, as women, are much more patient and patience is what a researcher needs in the laboratory. Yes, I believe that I am very much suitable to be a scientist as a woman. I cannot guess if I will face with any problems in the future arising because of my gender. Maybe if I become a dean, I might face such problems. (TR, female candidate, 19)

The implicit equation of power with masculinity was also reflected in the transfer of the image of the man as the head of the household to an organisational context by a male evaluator who equated a man’s location at the head of the table with leadership:

if you see someone at a meeting sitting at the head of the table: if it is a man he is the leader, if it is a woman you think she’s is something else. It is difficult to get rid of these culturally entrenched ideas and prejudices. (IT, male evaluator, 04)

Thus, even if the woman occupies a similar physical location, it was seen as having a different resonance: implicitly echoing her subordinate position in the household.

The stereotypical (monastic) image of a scientist was seen as having implications for women (White, 2014), with the assumption that the life style of a scientist excluded any kind of family life:

Everything is based on the assumption that a person should be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year ... the present work model does not take the family aspect of a person’s life into account. And this is terrible for both men and women ... this appeal ‘you should be the best’ which means that you are not supposed to have a personal life. (BG, male candidate, 14)

Although this respondent suggests that this stereotype impacts on both men and women, women were seen as having the main responsibilities in the domestic area, effectively limiting the time they had available to undertake paid work: ‘it is expected that a mother has more to do with her children and the family when the children are small’ (DE, F, C, 02). This becomes particularly acute in the context of the legitimacy of a long hours culture with the expectation that paid work can and indeed should legitimately include the whole 24 hours. Other respondents referred to this: ‘You are not judging the quality of what they do within the 39 hour week, you are judging what they do twenty four-seven. And some people more so women than men, have less time to devote twenty-four-seven’ (IE, female evaluator, 07). This issue has been of long standing concern to the EU in the context of work/life balance.

In summary, micro-political masculinist practices were referred to by respondents in all five HEIs. Women were more likely to refer to cognitive biases and men to stereotypes which implicitly reflected gendered power. Both men and women endorsed the monastic image of the scientist and its tension with family life: while recognising that given the allocation of domestic and caring responsibilities, this impacted more on women. References to these practices were most likely to be made by female candidates: a pattern that may be related to the fact that men (as in all hegemonies) were less likely
to refer to masculinist practices. Men were also more likely to be evaluators because of their greater access to senior positions.

**Micro-political relational practices**

Universities, like other organisations, have an informal structure which is revealed though the daily practices, relationships and behaviours of members of the organisation (Morley, 1999). Such relationships have often been referred to as nepotism or cronyism. These are widely seen as unacceptable. Sponsorship is seen in a very different light although it also has a relational base with Ibarra, Carter, & Silva (2010) suggesting that women are under-sponsored. Influential informal relationships with powerful others were referred to in varying degrees by all respondents. In the absence of a clear objective definition of excellence, relationships between candidates and evaluators were seen as crucial in affecting outcomes:

> What matters most are the close relations of a candidate with jury members. Yes, I know that they sign a declaration that there is no conflict of interests, but it does not necessarily mean that they have no friendly relationships. ... It’s the most difficult task to assess the work of a friend ... since there is always an emotional aspect that produces a bias. (BG, male evaluator, 05)

Respondents from the Turkish university raised the question: ‘Will you be able to select a candidate that you do not like?’ (TR, male evaluator, 03). They also recognised that although official criteria were laid down at national level, the jury could interpret the official criteria to favour one applicant over another: ‘Although the criteria for promotion are clearly defined by the Council of Higher Education, it all depends on how the jury members interpret those criteria’ (TR, female candidate, 44). Deviations from objective criteria were perceived by evaluators as facilitated by the ambiguity surrounding the concept of excellence and the perceived need to include subjective elements:

> Of course, measurable parameters must not be denigrated and neglected, but they are to be taken with a grain of salt. ... When I have to judge a candidate I first consider the measurable parameters, but then, in order to achieve a reasonable judgment, I have to add subjective parameters to my consideration. (IT, male evaluator, 07)

This male evaluator does not suggest that these processes are gendered. However, when there is a move away from objective criteria, the possibility of gender bias is difficult to eliminate. Hence, although it was recognised that it was necessary to meet the relevant criteria, the importance of having an influential sponsor in such a context to ensure a favourable outcome was stressed. In the Irish organisation, ‘paying forward’ and creating bonds of indebtedness was normalised:

> If you’ve nobody on the other side of the table fighting your case, you’ve no chance ... You arrange [that] through [favours], you know. ... Because ... when they pick up the phone and ask you to do something you do it. And you do it not just once you might do it fifty times. So, when your application goes in you’d expect them to support you. (IE, male candidate, 23)

Much was made particularly by the Bulgarian and Irish respondents, of the importance of relationships with those in power in impacting on success in recruitment/
progression: ‘Most often the successful candidate … is a protégé of the institutional or departmental management’ (BG, male candidate, 12). Respondents from the German HEI referred to the importance of powerful sponsors, who they described as ‘relatively ruthless in placing their own people’ (DE, male candidate, 07). They saw age as well as gender as defining features of influential sponsors, referring to ‘a squad of older men, to put it frankly, who are in a position of power … If you want to get into that as a younger person, you have to … become visible’ (DE, female candidate, 12). The German women, like their Italian and Irish counterparts, disapproved of this deviation from more objective criteria:

I think the issues that are only based on professional skills are very attractive for women – the honest work. But when it comes to this power issue, which is present today … I think a lot of women are deterred by it, also disgusted. (DE, female candidate, 16)

Other studies have shown that women tend to be more ambivalent about ‘playing the game’ (Davey, 2008) possibly because they are less clear about the ‘rules’ in male dominated structures or see themselves as less culturally valued and less able to leverage relational support in such contexts. For the Bulgarian men particularly, micro-political relational practices were perceived as unrelated to gender: ‘Gender of the candidates does not matter at all. What only matters is whether your boss, the head of the department, your dean, or someone else at the top favours you or not’ (BG, male evaluator, 05). Overall, men are more likely to be in senior positions, and, given processes such as homosociability, they are more likely to have strong relationships with those in power. They are also less likely to be aware of gendered processes that favour men. It is possible that such processes are gendered, although most men may not perceive this.

In summary, individual relationships with those in powerful positions were seen by both candidates and evaluators, and by respondents in all five organisational contexts, as important in affecting evaluations of the excellence of the candidates. Men were more likely than women to refer to these relational practices. Male evaluators were particularly likely to refer to them, arguably reflecting their experiences and the perceived legitimacy of these practices. Such practices can alternatively be seen as nepotism or cronyism: with relationships, rather than any objective assessments of the applicants’ merit, being crucial.

Micro-political practices: ‘local fit’

The focus here is on micro-political processes operating in the local context rather than through an individual influential relationship. The ‘inbreeding system’ which has been identified in Spanish HEIs is an extreme example of this (Cruz-Castro & Sanz-Menéndez, 2010; Sanz-Menéndez, Cruz-Castro, & Alva 2013; Montes López, 2017; Vázquez-Cupeiro & Elston, 2006). ‘Inbreeding’ reflects an unofficial and unwritten rule that each new member of the department should be selected from the members of the internal dominant group. This unofficial convention and the organisational culture that has created it ensures that most academic careers are spent in the same university (Cebreiro & San Segundo, 1998). The most valued attribute is to ‘be a good colleague’ with the odds of getting tenure within
three years being paradoxically increased for every additional year taken to get the PhD and with geographical mobility being inversely related to tenure (Sanz-Menéndez, Cruz-Castro & Alva 2013; Cruz-Castro & Sanz-Menéndez, 2010). Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez (2010, p. 36) found that the odds of getting tenure three years after a PhD ‘are more than double for male researchers than for their female counterparts’ (34% vs. 16%). They also found that such odds were particularly high in predominantly male areas such as engineering. Thus, inbreeding appears to be a mechanism for directly and indirectly perpetuating male advantage.

The importance of ‘local logics’ (Grummell et al., 2009) or ‘departmental fit’ is a less extreme variation. Such micro-political practices are also facilitated by vagueness surrounding the concept of excellence: ‘I have never come across an exact definition, a scientific one, of this term. Maybe the Nobel Prize … but … how many Nobel Prize winners are there?’ (BG, female candidate, 16). Thus, effectively, it was open to evaluators to prioritise specific elements which might facilitate the recruitment of local candidates that ‘fitted’. This was sometimes stated explicitly by evaluators: ‘scientific excellence is not what we are looking for; we primarily seek someone who can meet the needs of our department’ (TR, female evaluator, 40). Departmental ‘fit’ was also referred to by the Irish respondents. The departmental needs were differently defined in different contexts. Roth and Sonnert (2010) highlighted the problems that emerged from a lack of management skills in research organisations. In the Italian HEI, management skills were seen as particularly important:

It is not always the candidate with the highest impact factor that best serves the centre. It may very well be that at a given time it is more important to choose the candidate with the best managerial skills … it is not sufficient to bring heavy scientific luggage. One also has to have soft skills in order to appreciate and to create value from different human resources. (IT, male evaluator, 02)

In that context, the respondents were all full-time researchers whose jobs depended on funding: ‘The economic crisis today requires that a good researcher is also able to find the funding to finance his research’ (IT, male candidate, 10). Most respondents in the relatively high ranking German university also referred to the importance of funding: ‘I see tendencies that university boards really want external funds’ (DE, male candidate, 08). Others from the German HEI (the most highly ranked of the universities) presented a more broadly based construction of excellence, including teaching, research and management:

We also had applicants that were considered to be among the top scientists in the field

field worldwide, but we did not invite them [for interview], because we came to the conclusion that they are not able to lead a group … scientists who may be really good individually, but are not able to build a group or lead it, that are not able to give a proper lecture, … well, they are out of the question. (DE, male evaluator, 01)

German and Turkish respondents referred to a tension between departmental prioritisation of fit and broader university logics. Thus, there was a suggestion that the valuation of teaching was not officially supported, although it was depicted as important
to the department: ‘It’s not only publications we are doing here. We are educating students... We are teachers ... But such abilities are not part of the hiring legislation’ (TR, female evaluator, 01). In the Irish university, women’s concern with teaching was seen as hindering their career progression:

Women are wasting their time doing the right thing.... They are more committed lecturers; they are more committed to the peripherals than men: looking after the students, being more diligent with lecture preparation ... and all those other areas that give them no brownie points when it comes to promotion. Not quantifiable. (IE, female evaluator, 06)

Constructions of excellence related to teaching and language skills were referred to by respondents from the Bulgarian and Turkish universities. Insofar as women have traditionally been seen as more likely than men to be committed to teaching (Sax, Hagedorn, Arredondo, & DiCrisi, 2002), the inclusion of teaching is potentially helpful to women as a group. In the Bulgarian university, language skills were also seen as very important in addition to scientific expertise: ‘the first is excellent knowledge of his or her scientific field. The second one ... is the good command of the foreign language which is acknowledged and used in his or her particular research field’ (BG, male evaluator, 02). Given women’s greater facility with languages (Burman, Bitanc, & Booth, 2008), such a criterion also potentially implicitly advantages women as a group.

Because of the vagueness surrounding the definitions of excellence, criteria could in practice be moulded to facilitate local candidates. In all five of the organisations, fit was referred to, although there was variation in the implicit gendering of the criteria. Men were more likely than women to refer to ‘local fit’: reflecting other evidence that women are more likely to focus on objective criteria. It was clear that in some cases ‘local fit’ was prioritised over institutional requirements. This could facilitate the appointment of mediocre people or those who exemplified departmental as opposed to institutional priorities (e.g. teaching rather than research). Evaluators were more likely than candidates to refer to the micro-political practice of ‘local fit’: arguably reflecting their greater experiences in an evaluative context and the perceived legitimacy of ‘fit’ as a criterion for recruitment/progression.

**Summary and conclusions**

In contexts where public universities are exposed to the conflicting expectations of multiple stakeholders and to increasing pressure as regards accountability, a concept of excellence which is immune from relational, contextual and gender bias is very attractive. The vagueness of this concept potentially facilitates its use as a ‘rationalising myth’ (Nielsen, 2016).

Micro-politics (Lumby, 2015) and practices (Martin, 2003, 2006) have been seen as important in understanding the operation of informal power in organisations. It has been recognised that such practices are difficult to change, infused as they often are with cultural stereotypes and supported by wider organisational and societal structures. The key contribution of this article lies in the identification and illustration of three micro-political practices involved in recruitment/progression in HEIs. Respondents perceived all three micro-political practices as existing in all HEIs. ‘Local fit’ was not seen by male
respondents in the Bulgarian HEI as inevitably favouring men. This, together with limited references to masculinist micro-political practices in the Turkish HEI, may be partly related to the fact that these organisations had the highest proportion of women in (full) professorships in STEM (and indeed the highest proportion of women in [full] professorships overall: Table 2).

Four of the five organisations were public universities. The broad similarities between the patterns emerging across all five organisations as regards micro-political practices suggest the importance of informal power – regardless of variation in size, age or the salience of STEM in the organisation. However, since all but one of the universities had relatively low rankings (Table 2), further research is needed to explore whether these micro-political practices also exist in highly ranked universities. The inclusion of a research foundation suggests that these practices are not peculiar to universities, although this also needs to be further explored.

Women were generally more likely to refer to masculinist micro-politics, and men more likely to refer to relational practices and to ‘local fit’. It appeared that a focus on ‘fit’ could facilitate the appointment of mediocre people and/or the recruitment of people who exemplified departmental priorities which were in tension with the official organisational ‘logic’ (Pache & Santos Insead, 2013).

References to these micro-political practices varied between candidates and evaluators: with candidates being more likely to refer to masculinist micro-political practices and evaluators to ‘local fit’. Female candidates were most likely to refer to micro-political masculinist practices and male evaluators to those related to ‘local fit’: arguably reflecting their different positioning in relation to recruitment/progression in male dominated masculinist structures. On the other hand, candidates and evaluators were equally likely to refer to relational practices: arguably reflecting the perceived legitimacy and importance of individual relationships with powerful sponsors. These practices sit uneasily with a focus on purportedly objective criteria of excellence, unmediated by relationships, gender or context. It is possible that excellence is being used as a legitimating logic, obscuring these micro-political practices. Although it is widely accepted that evaluation is a social process, a focus on micro-political practices raises challenging issues for HEIs.

There are considerable limitations arising from the use of case studies and from the reliance on qualitative data. Nevertheless, the identification of micro-political practices raises questions about the impact of the relational, gendered and local context in which evaluative decisions are made. It raises even more fundamental questions about the extent to which evaluations of excellence can ever transcend micro-political practices: practices which are arguably likely to be gendered.

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