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Recruitment materials could help perpetuate the gender disparity and gender pay gap in secondary headship

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ABSTRACT

Previous research demonstrates that subtle changes to recruitment materials can impact an applicants' perceived fit with the role being advertised and their inclination to apply. This has included an analysis of the effects on female applicants. Little research has explored recruitment materials for specific roles, such as headteachers. This study systematically evaluated applicant packs (164 documents; 1504 pages) for 59 Secondary Headteacher roles and found evidence to suggest recruitment materials constitute an institutional mechanism that could contribute to sustaining gender inequality in UK Headship. This analysis identifies features more likely to deter or disadvantage female applicants than their male counterparts. However, 10–22% of definitive documents (e.g. job adverts) use wording that could deter women. The salary ambiguity that surfaced is likely to disadvantage women and contribute to the gender pay gap. Inconsistent applicant packs, Job Descriptors and Person Specifications were unanticipated findings suggesting a 'cottage industry' approach to recruitment and more likely to disadvantage female applicants. Most Person Specifications were unrealistic (73.1% listed ≥30 criteria) and ambiguous (15% did not specify Essential/Desirable criteria; 49% did not indicate assessment method). Benefits that could attract female candidates were not prioritised (e.g. tax-free cycle-to-work schemes were promoted four times more than childcare schemes). Recommendations for gender-fair job design are discussed.

Introduction

One of the most important strategic decision points in the life of any School is the appointment of a headteacher, with the process of recruitment and selection lying with the School's Governing Board (Atton and Fidler 2003; DfE 2024; Huber and Pashiardis 2009, 176–199). However, headteacher

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appointment is a generally under-researched area and investigation of headteacher recruitment materials has not been extensively researched, which is why we undertook the study reported here.

The governance of headteacher recruitment processes in secondary schools is diverse and evolving. Within a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), the Executive Principal/Chief Executive may hold an advisory role, while Local Authorities hold the advisory role in schools they maintain. A representative of the local diocese may also hold an advisory role in schools with a religious affiliation (DfE 2016; Huber and Pashiardis 2009, 176–199).

The most recent Department for Education (DfE) data demonstrates persistent gender inequality in teaching leadership roles (DfE 2022), alongside School Governing Boards facing increasing recruitment challenges including an (inter)-national shortfall of qualified candidates (Connolly et al. 2018; Draper and McMichael 2003). Previous research has identified a range of individual factors (for example stereotypes) that affect gender disparities at headship alongside institutional mechanisms that sustain these inequalities and influence perceptions and attitudes towards female headteachers (for example Fuller 2016, 2017). An under-researched institutional mechanism that could contribute to gender and racial disparities at headship is recruitment materials. The overall aim of this study was to critically analyse Secondary Headteacher recruitment materials to determine any consistent features that could make the role seem less or more appealing to prospective female candidates.

In order to achieve this aim, a gender-based critical analysis framework was synthesised from a literature review of the previous research that has identified specific features of recruitment materials that attract or deter prospective female candidates. For example, Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay (2011) demonstrated that small word changes can subtly signal who belongs and who does not belong in the role being advertised. This study showed word choice is important for gender equity as the appeal of a position could be reduced specifically for women if a job advertisement (advert) used subtle masculine wording (Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay 2011).

Our main interest was in identifying any consistent features of Secondary Headteacher recruitment materials that have been previously shown to deter or attract women to the role being advertised, and to surface evidence-based recommendations.

Literature review

In this section, we first summarise the literature about gender inequality in teaching leadership in order to surface problematic trends. We then review the research exploring headteacher recruitment to explain what is already known, to locate our findings and to contribute to that literature. Finally, we provide an analysis of the research literature that has identified features of recruitment materials that increase or decrease the appeal of the role being

advertised to prospective female candidates. Our rationale for reviewing this literature was that it allowed us to synthesise an evidence-based framework for the systematic gender-based critical analysis of secondary headteacher recruitment materials and supports our critical evaluation of their role as an institutional mechanism that perpetuates gender inequalities in teaching leadership. In doing so, we are able to propose evidence-based recommendations for diversifying the prospective candidate pool in this context.

Women remain under-represented in UK headship

The 2022 DfE report on school leadership characteristics and trends from 2010 to 2020 demonstrates that women are persistently under-represented in teaching leadership roles in comparison with the proportion of women who make up the teaching workforce (DfE 2022). There is a clear 'leaky pipeline' from junior to senior educational leadership roles (Figure 1), with the largest gender disparity at headteacher. In secondary schools in 2020, 63% of the teaching workforce were female compared with 40% of headteachers. These findings are comparable with earlier research analysing DfE workforce census reports from 2005 to 2015/16, leading to an estimate of 2040 as the earliest date when the proportion of women headteachers may match the proportion of women in the teaching workforce (Fuller 2016; TES 2016).

Gender inequality in school leadership has been researched extensively and a range of barriers to retention and career progression alongside positive practices which may help address progress of women already in post to leadership positions have been demonstrated (for example Fuller 2016, 2017). However,

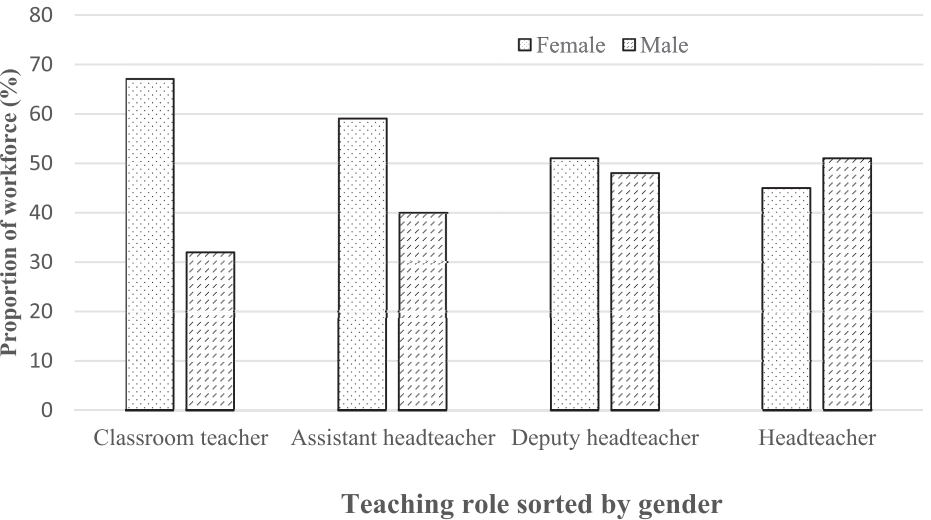**Teaching role sorted by gender**

Figure 1. Proportionate changes in the gender balance from classroom teacher (most junior role) to headteacher (most senior role) – 2023/24 (DfE Census, Secondary schools in England; Gender unspecified is excluded).

the role that headteacher recruitment materials may play in perpetuating these disparities has not yet been a research focus.

Headteacher recruitment

Despite its importance to the success of a school, the process of headteacher appointment is not well-researched (James et al. 2019). Advice on UK headteacher recruitment is available from the National Governance Association (NGA) who have authored guidance and a toolkit (2017, 2020). However, little reference or detail about the research underpinning this published advice is available. Studies into headteacher recruitment are typically categorised as 'supply-side' or 'demand-side', depending on the research focus. The majority of studies have explored supply-side issues, predominantly researching teachers' own accounts of incentives and barriers to career progression (Kwan and Walker 2009). Such research has surfaced a range of factors that deter progression, including workload and work-life balance, increasing managerialism, risk and isolation (for example Connolly et al. 2018; Davies et al. 2018; Grummell, Devine, and Lynch 2009; James et al. 2019; Mac-Beath et al. 2009; Tunnadine 2011). These studies are often contextualised within the headteacher appointment process of specific countries, including the Republic of Ireland (Grummell, Devine, and Lynch 2009), Wales (Davies et al. 2018), Scotland (MacBeath et al. 2009) and England (James et al. 2019), but Huber and Pashiardis (2009) provided an informative comparative analysis. The role that recruitment materials play in career progression for people from under-represented groups has not yet been explored from a supply-side perspective.

Demand-side studies constitute a smaller body of literature and have focussed on how selection criteria are defined (Kwan and Walker 2009, 35). Kwan (2010) demonstrated that, in Hong Kong, managerial and administrative skills are prioritised, while the analysis of UK headteacher job adverts (Kirkham 2000) and Job Descriptors (Thomson 2009) revealed the qualities and expectations articulated in these documents were derived from the language used by official bodies such as the Teacher Training Agency (Kirkham 2000) and Ofsted inspectorate (Thomson 2009). Milton et al.'s (2020) content analysis of Welsh headteacher Job Descriptors concluded that stakeholders responsible for recruitment lacked agency. To date, there is only one demand-side research study that has analysed whether there are any consistent features of Primary Headteacher recruitment materials that may attract or deter prospective candidates from under-represented groups (Hooper, Malika, and Angelopoulos 2024).

The impact of the specific features in recruitment materials on prospective candidate's perceptions of the role being advertised

Job adverts are often the first point of contact for employers, a 'shop window' for potential applicants for the role being advertised. Previous research

(outlined below) demonstrates that small and subtle changes to the specific wording employed in recruitment materials can impact the appeal of the position, an applicants' perceived fit with the role being advertised and their subsequent inclination to apply.

Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay (2011) evaluated the effects of gendered wording in recruitment materials on men and women's perceptions of the role being advertised. This study demonstrated that gendered wording subtly signals who does and who does not belong in a role by affecting perceptions of gender diversity within the organisation, the job appeal and the anticipated belongingness in the role being advertised. Published lists of stereotypical masculine and feminine trait words (for example *assertive* vs. *understanding*) were used to generate identical job adverts that used subtle masculine wording, feminine wording or were neutrally worded. The appeal of the position and the anticipated sense of belonging in that role were only reduced in women when adverts used masculine wording. In contrast, there was no significant effect on the appeal of a position to men, or their perception of belonging in that role if the advert used feminine wording (Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay 2011). Horvath and Sczesny (2016) also demonstrated the importance of gendered language in leadership adverts and concluded that women are motivated to apply if they are linguistically visible in the text of recruitment materials. For example, use of word pairs (he/she) for pronouns reduced women's perceived lack of fit with the role being advertised.

Research investigating strategies to increase the diversity of the appeal of public sector jobs has shown that small changes to recruitment materials which emphasised challenges and employee benefits (for example continuing professional development, CPD) associated with the role being advertised were more effective than traditional messages which utilised appeals to an applicant's public service motivation (for example potential for community impact) (Linos 2018). Advertising utilising either public service messages or emphasising employee benefits were compared and recruitment materials that promoted employee benefits were shown to be three times more effective in increasing applications. The greatest effects of employee benefits were on women and ethnic minority groups and the most effective recruitment messages utilised in this study more than doubled the likelihood of an application (Linos 2018). These findings are consistent with the research of Lee (2018) who determined job descriptions containing CPD and training opportunities could encourage more women to apply for a position.

Mohr (2014) surveyed male and female professionals about barriers to making a job application and found that 78% of the reasons that women gave for not applying for a job stem from a belief that recruitment processes are inflexible and designed to eliminate candidates who are not fully qualified. Despite men articulating the same general reasons for not making a job application as women, gender-based differences in specific reasons were revealed; men were

significantly less likely than women to indicate '*I was following the guidelines about who should apply*' and '*I didn't think they would hire me since I didn't meet the qualifications*' and '*I didn't want to put myself out there if I was likely to fail*', as barriers to applying for a role. Thus, women are more unlikely than men to apply for a position if they do not meet all of the qualifications, skills and experience articulated in the Person Specification, as they believe that their application would fail to be considered. These findings are consistent with gender-based differences in job searching behaviours revealed in research conducted by LinkedIn (Tockey and Ignatova 2019). Analysis of data on billions of interactions show that women and men explore job opportunities similarly, however on average women apply for fewer positions than men, and in particular far fewer senior, or 'stretch' positions (Tockey and Ignatova 2019).

Findings from research investigating the role that organisational messages of diversity in recruitment materials can play a role in attracting under-represented groups are complex. Studies suggest that organisational diversity statements can be effective if they express a value for difference, emphasise scope for autonomy and are aspirational (Carnes, Fine, and Sheridan 2019). However, some diversity-related messages have been shown to 'backfire'. The impact of different types of diversity messages on applicants' perception of a leadership position and their willingness to apply has been investigated (Nater and Sczesny 2016). Female applicants reported the lowest inclination to apply if the strongest diversity messages (for example affirmative action quotas) in favour of their gender were articulated in the recruitment information (Nater and Sczesny 2016).

This literature research revealed the critical analysis of recruitment materials for specific roles is under-researched and there is no research focussing on the role that they may play in the progression of women into teaching leadership positions, which is why we conducted the study reported here.

Development of hypotheses

Given the lack of scrutiny surrounding the role and impact of recruitment materials in diversifying recruitment to headteacher roles, we aim to study the gender inclusivity of Secondary Headteacher applicant packs as an institutional mechanism that perpetuates gender inequality in headship. Given the persistent under-representation of women in secondary headship, we hypothesise that applicants' packs will not be gender inclusive.

Materials and methods

Data source

Job adverts were sourced from Gov.UK Teaching Vacancies (https://teaching-vacancies.service.gov.uk/). Positions were retrieved using each of the search

terms: 'headteacher', 'head teacher', 'principal', 'head of school', 'school head', 'head of academy', 'academy head', 'headmaster' and 'head master'. Each list of job matches returned was filtered 'Secondary' [educational phase]. Any duplicates or positions that were not permanent secondary head-teacher roles were deleted. An initial assessment of the range of working patterns available was made by systematically filtering each list of job matches by 'part time', 'flexible', 'job share' and 'term time'.

Fifty-nine permanent secondary headteacher job adverts were identified and the complete applicant packs for each role were sourced. The verbatim text was used for all subsequent data coding and analysis, excluding personally identifiable data. Descriptive data (ownership structure, religious affiliation, n students, admissions policy, Ofsted rating, advertised salary, school postcode, gender of outgoing headteacher) were coded into an Excel spreadsheet and an IBM SPSS Statistics database for descriptive statistics and non-parametric statistical analysis, respectively. A school location map was generated by submitting school postcodes into the 'My Maps' function of Google Maps (https://www.google.com/maps/). Ofsted inspection reports were retrieved from job adverts or from the Gov.UK tool 'Find and compare schools in England' (https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/). The gender of outgoing headteachers were retrieved from applicant packs, or from School websites. Mean salary was calculated by averaging the mid-point of the advertised salary band. Salary bands quoted as either Leadership Group spine points or group ranges for headteachers were converted to Pounds Stirling using conversion data tables (available at: https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/pay-pensions/pay-scales/england-pay-scales.html). POLAR (Participation of Local Areas classification) is a UK-wide, area-based measure that groups geographical areas according to the proportion of young people living in them who participate in HE by the age of 19 (https://www.office forstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/search-by-postcode/). POLAR4 data is widely used in the UK as an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage, with postcodes in POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2 considered as low participation in HE backgrounds and a socioeconomically disadvantaged background. POLAR4 was utilised to determine low participation in HE background using school postcode (OfS n.d.).

Statistical analysis

SPSS was used to conduct Kruskal–Wallis statistical tests for differences in the distribution of the means (p) between independent variables, for example OFSTED rating and average Headteacher salary. If $p \leq 0.05$, the probability of the variables being associated with each other is statistically significant.

Gender-based critical analysis framework

Specific features of recruitment materials that effect an applicant's perceived fit with the role being advertised and their subsequent intent to apply were synthesised into a framework for the critical analysis of secondary headteacher recruitment materials (Table 1). Data collected for each framework element were coded into an Excel spreadsheet for descriptive statistics and an SPSS database for non-parametric statistics.

Positive action statements and organisational diversity statements

A positive action statement was defined using the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) description: '*including statements in job adverts to encourage applications from under-represented groups, such as "we welcome female applicants"*'. An organisational diversity statement was defined as text outlining the school's general commitment to equality of opportunity in the workplace (and do not target candidates from under-represented group(s)) (Carnes, Fine, and Sheridan 2019; Equality and Human Rights Commission 2019).

Linguistic analysis of gendered wording in text of recruitment materials

The verbatim text of a document, excluding personal details, was analysed using a gender decoder tool (Matfield n.d.). This tool is based on the findings of Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay (2011) which demonstrated the effect of gender-coded language on women and men. This tool was chosen for this research as it is free, simple to use and provides a breakdown of all gender-coded words identified in submitted text. Submitted text is categorised as strongly masculine, masculine, neutral, feminine or strongly feminine (depending on the number and balance between feminine-coded and masculine-coded

Table 1. Gender-based critical analysis framework.

Framework element (evidential basis)	Data collected and data coding scheme
Gendered wording in text (Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay 2011; Horvath and Sczesny 2016)	Linguistic analysis of text using gender decoder tools (Matfield n.d., Totaljobs). Documents coded as gender inclusive if (strongly) feminine or neutrally worded. (Strongly) masculine-worded documents coded as gender exclusive.
Relevant employee benefits (Lee 2018; Linos 2018)	Record location, number and range of benefits, if articulated.
Clear and reasonable Person Specification and Job Descriptor (Mohr 2014; Tockey and Ignatova 2019)	Number of criteria; Indication of Essential and Desirable criteria in Person Specification; Indication of method of assessing criteria in Person Specification.
Positive action statement; organisational diversity statement; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies and/or relevant employer support for example, for carers (Carnes, Fine, and Sheridan 2019; Linos 2018; Nater and Sczesny 2016)	Record location, number and range, if articulated.

words identified). Where available, five documents for each position were analysed: (1) job advert, (2) school summary, (3) Person Specification, (4) Job Descriptor and (5) executive letter (for example from the Chair of the Board of Governors).

Results

Key characteristics of schools recruiting headteachers

Headteacher recruitment materials were sourced from diverse secondary schools that varied by geographical location, ownership structure, religious affiliation and size. The research sample included schools in inner-city, urban and rural locations (Figure 2) and the number of children on school roll (sometimes estimated or given instead as a maximum capacity) varied widely, with an average of $n = 899$ (standard deviation (std dev) 443; range 76–1552).

Just under three quarters of school were Academies (71.9%; $n = 41$) or Free schools (7.0%; $n = 4$), with 21.0% ($n = 12$) being Local Authority Maintained. Just under 1 in 10 (8.8%; $n = 5$) Academies were sponsor-led. These data reflect the national proportion (81.9%) of secondary schools which are either Academies or Free Schools (Gov.UK 2024). Of the 57 schools in the samples for which an Ofsted inspection report was available the majority (85.5%; $n = 51$) were judged 'good' or 'outstanding' (Figure 3(a)). These data are comparable with 2023 Ofsted inspections which judged 83% of secondary schools as good or outstanding (Gov.UK 2024; Ofsted 2024). A total of 23.7% ($n = 14$) of schools had a religious character, with 57% ($n = 8$) being Roman Catholic, 36% ($n = 5$) being Anglican (associated with the Church of England, abbrev. CofE) and n

Figure 2. School locations.

1.7 (n=1)

8.5 (n=5)

13.6 (n-8)

- None
- Roman Catholic
- Church of England
- Islamic

76.3 (n=45)

a

10.5% (n=6)

19.3% (n=11)

- Outstanding
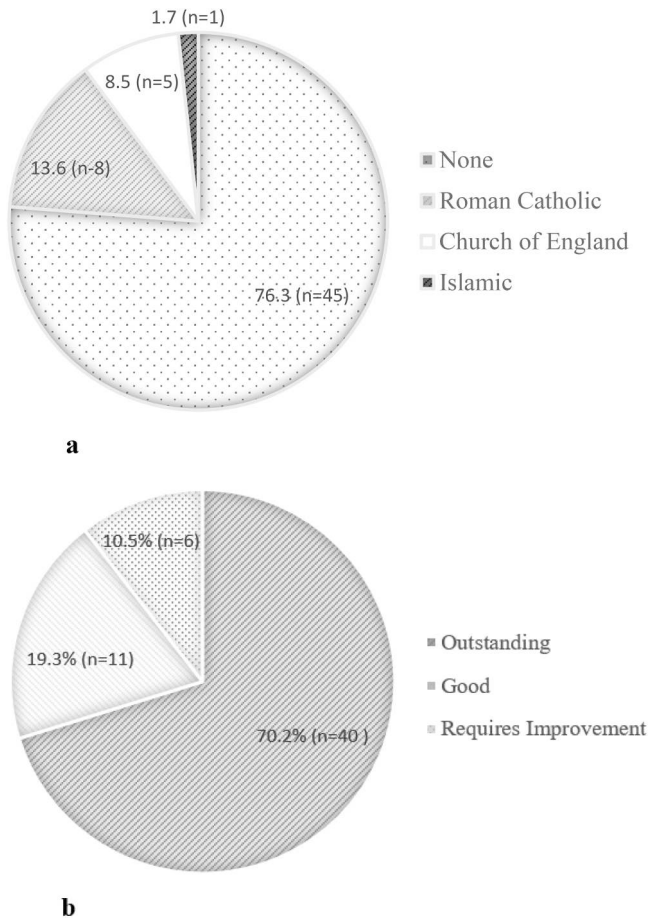- Good
- Requires Improvement

70.2% (n=40)

b

Figure 3. School characteristics. (a) School religious affiliation. (b) School Ofsted grade.

= 1 (7%) being Muslim. These data are comparable to the proportion of UK secondary schools with a religious character (18%), with Roman Catholicism and non-Christian affiliations being the most and least common affiliations, respectively (Long, Roberts, and Maisuria 2024; Plaister 2023) (Figure 3(b)).

Ten (16.9%) schools had a selective admissions policy and 11 (18.6%) were non-mainstream schools, providing education for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) for students who cannot attend mainstream school (GOV.UK 2013). A small minority of schools (6.8%; $n = 4$) were single sex (ratio of 3:1, male:female).

The apparent and actual prevalence of flexible working opportunities

None (0%) of the outgoing headteachers were in co-headship positions and all positions (100%; $n = 59$) were advertised as full time. No (0%) adverts were returned if initial job searches were filtered by any working pattern other

than full time (i.e. there were no (0%) advertised opportunities for 'part time', 'flexible', 'job share' or 'term time' roles).

Subsequent analysis of each complete applicant pack revealed opportunity for flexible working did exist in 22% (*n* = 13) positions, however, this information was not prioritised and inconsistently located (Table 2).

The lack of transparency and unpredictable variation in Headteacher salary

Nearly a fifth (18.6%; *n* = 11) of adverts framed salary as negotiable (for example '*Starting salary negotiable dependent on experience*') or competitive (for example '*Competitive for a Group 7 School*'). Where salary was quoted it was given one of three ways; GBP (£), leadership group spine point codes or group range codes for headteachers (NASUWT 2024). Of the 48 adverts that referred to specific salary information, nearly all (94%; *n* = 45) quoted wide salary bands, with three positions (6.3%) including only a minimum starting salary.

The overall average salary was £95,479 and varied widely (Table 3), with an average difference of £13,781 between the lower and upper spine points of salary ranges. Salary variation was unpredictable and not significantly influenced by the number of enrolled students ($p = 0.473$), School location

Table 2. The location of flexible working information in headteacher applicant packs.

Location of opportunity (size of document)	Type of flexible working opportunity	N documents in applicant pack (total size)
Application form (7 pages)	Job share	2 (30 pages)
Application form (7 pages)	Job share	2 (19 pages)
Application form (9 pages)	Job share	4 (25 pages)
Application form (17 pages)	Job share	4 (40 pages)
Application form (17 pages)	Job share	3 (32 pages)
Application form (18 pages)	Job share	7 (54 pages)
Application form (17 pages)	Job share	6 (56 pages)
Application form (17 pages)	Job share	9 (67 pages)
Application form (9 pages)	Job share	3 (33 pages)
Applicant information pack (13 pages)	Job share	3 (29 pages)
Applicant information pack (9 pages)	Flexible working	1 (10 pages)
Applicant information pack (80 pages)	Flexible working	1 (80 pages)
Employee benefits (1 page)	Flexible working and enhanced Maternity, Paternity and Adoption leave	4 (8 pages)

Table 3. Salary ambiguity and variability in secondary headteacher job adverts.

		Advertised salary band (£)	
	Advertised salary (£)	Lower spine point	Upper spine point
Average	95,479	88,865	102,646
Std dev	12,993	11,583	12,913
Range	67,351–110,000	78,010–131,056	

(POLAR4 low participation in HE status) ($p = 0.321$), OFSTED rating ($p = 0.215$) or school ownership arrangement ($p = 0.368$).

Inconsistency in teaching leadership applicant packs, job descriptors and person specifications

Complete applicant packs for each of the 59 advertised positions were sourced for analysis. A total of 164 documents totalling 1504 pages were retrieved for analysis.

Inconsistency in applicant packs was notable, with wide variation in the quantity, complexity and organisation of information provided. Variable file formats (MS Word, MS PowerPoint and pdf) were used and the number of documents in applicant packs ranged from 1 to 8 (from 4 to 154 pages) (Table 4). Most packs (88.1%, $n = 52$) contained ≤ 4 documents, however 1 in 10 (11.9%, $n = 7$) contained 5–8 documents. To illustrate inconsistency, Table 4 provides a summary description of the simplest, longest and most complex applicant packs.

Significant variation in Job Descriptors was notable (Table 5), with the length varying due to inconsistency in both the number of principal accountabilities or main duties (range $n = 1$–20) and the number of individual duties and responsibilities listed (range $n = 3$–133) (Table 5).

Considerable variation in the complexity, number and type of criteria included in Person Specifications was also notable (Table 6; Figure 4). The

Table 4. Inconsistency in secondary headteacher applicant packs.

Applicant pack	Number of documents (document type)	Pages (n)
Shortest	1 (job descriptor)	4
Most complex	9 (application form; applicant notes; candidate information pack; employment contract; equality monitoring form; job avert; offenders disclosures form; privacy notice; reference consent)	63
Longest	4 (candidate pack; Ofsted report; safeguarding policy; safe recruitment policy)	154

Table 5. Inconsistency in secondary headteacher job descriptors.

	Pages (n)	Word count	Duties (n)	Responsibilities (n)
AVE (std dev)	3.7 (1.3)	1275 (529.9)	8 (3.6)	46 (21.4)
Range	1–8	525–2470	1–20	3–133

Table 6. Inconsistency in secondary headteacher person specifications.

	(n)			Criteria (n)		
	Pages	Word count	Categories	Total	Essential	Desirable
AVE (std dev)	2.7 (1.4)	637 (332)	6 (2.4)	38 (13)	35 (11)	7 (3.7)
Range	1–7	81–1327	1–13	6–75	15–60	0–17

a

b

Figure 4. Inconsistency in person specifications for secondary headteacher roles. (a) Of the $n = 75$ criteria specified, 80% ($n = 60$) are indicated as E for the role. However, method(s) of assessment are not specified. (b) Neither the method(s) of assessment or which of the criteria are Essential/Desirable are indicated in this Person Specification. (a) The longest Person Specification (3 pages; $n = 75$ criteria). (b) The shortest Person Specification ($n = 6$ criteria).

majority of Person Specifications were lengthy, with three quarters (73.1%) listing ≥30 criteria (Figure 4(a)). Where criteria were indicated as Essential or Desirable, the average percentage of criteria indicated as Essential was 83% (std dev 12.5) of the total, with two Person Specifications specifying all (100%) criteria as Essential (Figure 4(a)). Many Person Specifications lacked clarity about which criteria were Essential/Desirable and/or their method of assessment. Fifteen per cent ($n = 9$) of Person Specifications did not specify which criteria were Essential/Desirable for the role. Approximately half (49%; $n = 28$) of Person Specifications which included Essential/Desirable criteria did not indicate the assessment method (Figure 4(b)).

The prevalence of selection criteria that discriminate against candidates on grounds of religious belief

Nearly a quarter (23.8%; Figure 3(a)) of schools had a religious affiliation and recruitment materials unambiguously discriminated against headteacher candidates without a specified religious belief, for example '*The post … is reserved for a practising Catholic … '* and included evidence of a Faith Commitment as an essential criteria in the person specification, for example '*Letter from priest confirming regular worship*'.

The prevalence of recruitment materials that used wording that could deter female candidates

A majority of the recruitment documents analysed were gender inclusive as they used (strongly) feminine or neutral wording (Figure 5). However, 10–21% of definitive documents used subtle (strongly) masculine wording which could deter female candidates (Figure 6).
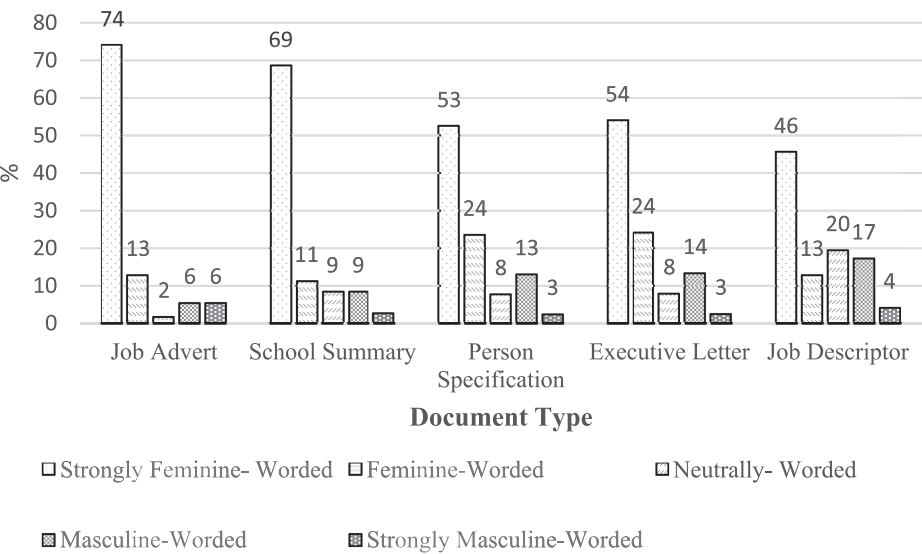
Figure 5. The prevalence of subtle gender-biased wording in recruitment documents.
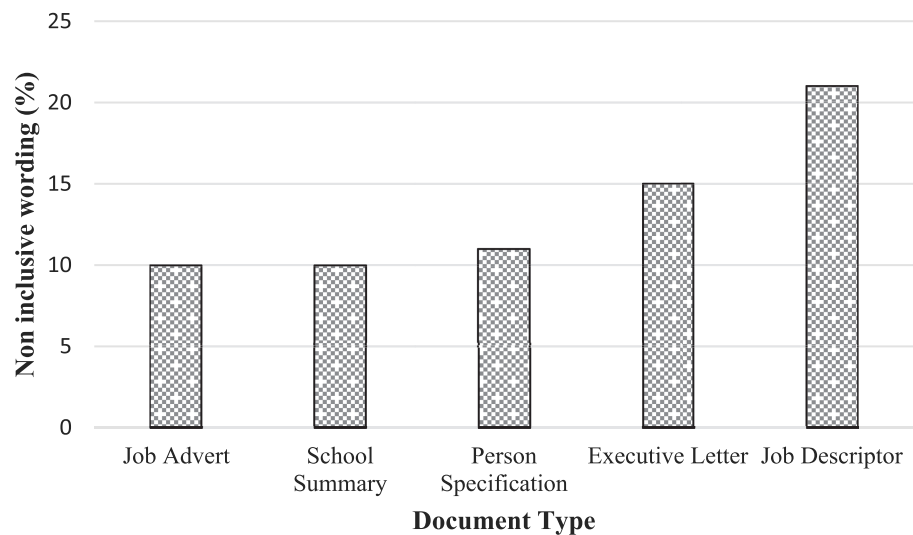
Figure 6. The prevalence of non-inclusively worded recruitment documents.

The prevalence of organisational diversity messages and positive action statements

A third (32%; *n* = 19) of applicant packs included an equality monitoring form and nearly two-thirds (62.7%; *n* = 37) articulated the school's general commitment to equality of opportunity in an organisational diversity statement. Overall, 14% (*n* = 8) of job adverts articulated a positive action statement or initiative. These adverts also informed applicants with a disability about reasonable adjustments to the recruitment process and four showcased their Disability Confident employer status. Six of these adverts promoted a Guaranteed Interview Scheme (GIS) for applicants with a disability and four targeted candidates from 'under-represented groups'. However, only one advert defined a candidate from an under-represented group as someone possessing one or more protected characteristic ('*ethnicity, gender, transgender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief*'). In contrast to the paucity of positive action statements and schemes, 93% (*n* = 55) of Secondary Headteacher Person Specifications or Job Descriptors included a requirement for applicants to evidence relevant engagement and their leadership on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

The prevalence and range of employee benefits

Excluding general pay and conditions (for example competitive salary, generous Annual Leave and pension scheme), general statements about the school environment (for example new school buildings) and the school location (for example good public transport and roads), 18% of schools did not articulate any specific employee benefits in their applicant packs. Table 7 itemises the range and frequency of employee benefits, with CPD/training occurring the most frequently. Mentoring, an Employee Assistance Scheme (EAS) and discounts were all prioritised over specific benefits for parents, such as work-life balance and family-friendly policies and childcare schemes (Table 7).

Table 7. Employee benefits in secondary headteacher applicant packs.

Employee benefit	Frequency (%)
Continuing professional development/training	48 (82)
Mentoring/coaching	19 (32)
Employee assistance scheme	19 (32)
Discounts, for example gym or health club membership	15 (25)
Work-life balance and family-friendly policies	13 (22)
Tax-free cycle-to-work scheme	11 (19)
Relocation allowance	8 (14)
Childcare vouchers	3 (5)
Performance-related bonus	2 (3)
Housing support	3 (2)
Location-based salary allowance (London, distant islands and remote schools)	1 (2)
Flexible working and enhanced maternity, paternity and adoption leave	1 (2)

Discussion

The apparent and actual prevalence of flexible working opportunities fails to prioritise female candidates with children

This study demonstrated that no headteacher roles were retrieved in job searches filtered by flexible working patterns on leading UK teaching job listings boards. However, this finding significantly underestimates the actual prevalence of flexible working opportunities revealed in the detailed analysis of headteacher applicant packs. Despite not being advertised, or retrievable, 22% of schools had flexible working opportunities. The fact that where flexible working opportunities existed, they could not be retrieved in searches that included a flexible working filter, was an unexpected but important finding, as this could be rectified relatively easily by ensuring that job adverts are correctly listed on job listings boards, meaning that they would be retrieved in searches for flexible working positions. There is also scope for teaching job boards to include a broader range of flexible working pattern filters, such as 'hybrid working', 'annualised hours' or 'compressed hours'.

This research also revealed that in the schools where flexible working opportunities existed, this information was not prioritised in job adverts and was difficult to find given the complexity, size of headteacher applicant packs and the inconsistent location of the information. In over two-thirds of the schools where flexible working opportunity existed, this information was illogically located in an application form i.e. it is unrealistic that a candidate seeking and failing to find information about flexible working would complete an application form. Only one school clearly promoted flexible working in an employee benefits document.

These are relevant findings given the general consensus that the availability of flexible working options improves gender equality in the workplace as many more women than men seek to work reduced hours, especially after childbirth (Andrew et al. 2021a; Harkness, Borkowska, and Pelikh 2019; Lyonette 2015) and seeking reduced work hours is irrespective of the mother's salary (Andrew et al. 2021a, 2021b).

The general paucity of flexible working opportunities coupled with the difficulty in finding the information where flexible working opportunities exist is therefore more likely to deter female candidates than their male counterparts. The NAHT (the School Leaders Union), the NGA, the Association of School and College Leaders and WomenEd have recognised the need to identify and tackle systemic barriers to flexible working in order to tackle gender disparities in educational leadership (NAHT 2021). The Shared Headship Network (SHN) was founded in 2017 to promote and support co-headship and has developed a shared-leadership matching tool. Rather than aiming to promote the availability of part-time leadership opportunities as a means to promote gender equality, the SHN places emphasis on the retention of experienced headteachers in

the post (SHN 2019), highlighting scope in this space for additional guidance and case studies illustrating the impact co-headship on gender equality (Allan 2008; DfE 2019). More generally, there is a paucity of literature on the impact of increasing the availability of part-time leadership opportunities to promote gender equality and highlights the scope for additional research.

The lack of transparency in advertised salary is likely to disadvantage female headteachers and contribute to the gender pay gap

Despite the broad national pay framework for the UK teaching workforce, male teachers typically earn more than their female counterparts regardless of school phase or structure and the more senior the position, the wider the gender pay gap becomes (DfE 2022; NAHT 2021). The 2022 DfE School Workforce data revealed that, in 2020/21, the average salary difference between male and female teachers was £3698 and that male secondary headteachers earned on average £2221 more/year than their female counterparts (DfE 2022). More recent research suggests that the gender pay gap in secondary headship has increased to £3908, the widest it has been for over a decade, and for heads aged 60 or over this has reached £15,961 (NAHT 2023; TES 2023). The National Association for Headteachers has called for an equity focussed review of the pay system and need to reintroduce central EDI support discontinued in 2020 (NAHT 2023).

The use of negotiable and broad salary bands surfaced in this research is likely to disadvantage women upon appointment as research has demonstrated that pay discretion and wage bargaining are determinants of the gender pay gap, including in teaching (Biasi and Sarsons 2022). 'Secret shopper' research that utilised identical applications differing by just the gender of the applicant demonstrates that women are likely to be offered a lower starting salary than their male counterpart (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). This finding was independent of the gender of the person making the salary offer (i.e. women, as well as men discriminate against female candidates), meaning female representation in the salary decision-making process is unlikely to redress the issue that female applicants are likely to be offered lower starting salaries than men. Framing salaries as negotiable is also likely to disadvantage female applicants, as there is a well-established gender gap in negotiation performance, with women less likely to be effective at negotiating a higher salary than men (Small et al. 2007). Bowles and Lai (2007) highlighted unhelpful self-beliefs such as feeling less entitled to higher salaries, being intimidated and experiencing anxiety during pay negotiations as examples of personal characteristics that inhibit effective negotiation in women. Other research has suggested gendered social norms around what is and is not socially appropriate may discourage women from salary negotiations that could be perceived as deviating from expected gendered behaviour (Babcock and Laschever 2009; Leibbrandt and List 2015).

In combination, these findings suggest that women are more likely to be offered a lower starting salary than men, and to accept it, which in itself can result in significant pay gaps because subsequent raises are primarily based on initial income levels (Dannals et al. 2021).

Adoption of a more precisely defined salary by headteacher job designers would help address this issue. However, ensuring responsibility is taken to achieve such change is not straightforward given headteacher job design is the combined work of Governing Bodies and Central Teams. Teaching leadership training providers could also support prospective female candidates by including wage bargaining as CPD in preparation for leadership (Gronn 2002).

Inconsistency in teaching leadership applicant packs, job descriptors and person specifications are more likely to deter female applicants

A 'cottage industry' approach to headteacher recruitment materials is illustrated via the highly inconsistent applicant packs, Job Descriptors and Person Specifications surfaced in this analysis. These findings suggest that the stakeholders involved in secondary headteacher job design lack adequate training and awareness of the available guidance and support. For example, the NGA provides an executive leader recruitment toolkit that covers fair recruitment and the production of a job advert, applicant pack and includes Job Descriptor and Person Specification templates (NGA 2020). This is an important area for improvement, as overly complex application packs are more likely to present a barrier for female applicants than male counterparts. On average, women have less spare time than men, and women with children have the least spare time available. Research consistently demonstrates that women are considerably more time poor than men, as women undertake significantly more unpaid labour, especially domestic labour such as childcare and housework (Aguiar and Hurst 2007; Botey Gaude et al. 2022; EIGE 2019; OfNS 2018, 2020; US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). Across the EU women on average undertake 13 h more unpaid work/week than men which results in women working 7 h more/week than men overall. Gender disparities increased when women and men with and without children were compared. Women and men with children spent 29.3 and 14.2 h more, respectively, on unpaid work compared with women and men without children (EIGE 2023).

The unrealistically lengthy and ambiguously assessed Person Specifications surfaced in this research and are also more likely to prove a barrier to female applicants as evidence suggests that women are socialised to follow 'rules' and perceive stated criteria as less flexible than they often are (Mohr 2014). Women can be held to higher standards than men, so they may perceive the need to fulfil more requirements to be successful (Biernat and Kobrynowicz 1997; Gorman and Kmec 2007; Hengel 2017). Some research suggests that women may lack the confidence to apply for a senior role until they are

overqualified (Mohr 2014; Risse, Farrell, and Fry 2018; Tockey and Ignatova 2019) and stands in contrast to men who have been shown to overestimate their capabilities, especially in stereotypically masculine contexts such as leadership roles (Beyer and Bowden 1997).

Our findings highlight the scope for improved clarity and consistency in applicant packs, especially in Person Specifications, specifically: a realistic number of criteria, indicating Essential/Desirable criteria, a realistic number of Essential criteria and specifying how criteria are assessed. These recommendations are consistent with Mohr (2014) who suggests that clear recruitment processes and requirements benefit all applicants.

A significant minority of recruitment documents use wording that could deter female candidates

Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay (2011) found that subtle variations in masculine and feminine wording in identical job adverts specifically effected women, who were deterred by masculine-worded documents. Despite it being positive that a clear majority of all recruitment documents analysed in this study used gender-inclusive wording, it remains that 10–21% of definitive documents from recruitment packs used wording that could deter female candidates, including 1 in 10 job adverts and over 20% of Job Descriptors. These findings suggest both scope for improvement and a lack of awareness surrounding the availability of gender decoder tools as an area of good recruitment practice.

(In)Visibility of positive action statements and initiatives fail to prioritise women or candidates from other under-represented groups

Positive action statements and initiatives are lawful voluntary interventions derived from the Equality Duty introduced in the Equality Act (2010) and assure, where applicable, that applicants with protected characteristics that are under-represented in the workforce may be prioritised over an equally qualified applicant with an overrepresented protected characteristic (Carnes, Fine, and Sheridan 2019; Equality and Human Rights Commission 2019; GOV.UK 2023).

Just 13% of headteacher job adverts articulated a positive action statement or initiative targeting prospective applicants from an under-represented group and no School (0%) targeted female candidates. Just six (9.8%) schools promoted GIS, for candidates with a disability. GIS are voluntary and ensure that an applicant with a specific barrier to employment, such as a disability, a history of service in the Armed Forces (Pike 2016) or care leaver status (Aylward 2017) are guaranteed an interview if they meet the minimum or essential criteria for the job. In this context, it is noteworthy that this research revealed that 15% of secondary headteacher Person Specifications did not specify which

criteria were essential or desirable for the position, meaning that a GIS would be impossible to implement. No (0%) schools stated that a GIS was available on the grounds of Armed Forces veteran status or care leaver status. The Disability Confident employer status showcased by just four (7%) Schools is assessed on how well institutions are following government guidance surrounding employing people with disabilities, including GIS and reasonable adjustments (GOV.UK 2019).

In contrast to the lack of information and schemes that prioritise diversity and inclusion, nearly two-thirds of schools promoted their general commitment to equality of opportunity via a general organisational diversity statement and over 90% expected candidates to evidence relevant engagement and their leadership of EDI.

The paucity of positive action statements and school schemes is an important area for improvement to both avoid potential discrimination and to try to better appeal to under-represented groups (Carnes, Fine, and Sheridan 2019; Linos 2018; Nater and Sczesny 2016). This finding also suggests that, in the majority of schools, the stakeholders involved in job design may lack adequate awareness and training around relevant EDI issues and good practice in this space. In the absence of Government action on meeting this unmet training need, the NGA have initiated an e-learning EDI training programme for Governing Boards (Knights 2022; NGA 2022). However, this research suggests that there is scope for more effective dissemination of information and additional support for headteacher job designers.

Recruitment materials failed to prioritise employee benefits that could attract female candidates

Previous studies (Lee and Eissenstat 2018; Linos 2018) have shown that CPD and mentoring could encourage female applicants, so their frequency in 82% and 32%, respectively, of headteacher applicant packs is a positive finding. In contrast, nearly a fifth (18%) of schools did not articulate any specific employee benefits and specific benefits for parents were not prioritised. Discounts (for example gym membership) were promoted more frequently than work-life balance and family-friendly policies and tax-free cycle-to-work schemes occurred four times as frequently as childcare schemes.

Despite some evidence which suggests the childcare gender gap (Schoonbroodt 2018) has narrowed following the COVID-19 pandemic (Farré et al. 2020; Sevilla and Smith 2020), women still bear disproportionately more responsibility than men (Andrew et al. 2021a, 2021b; Del Boca et al. 2020; OfNS 2020). The OfNS (2020) showed, on average, women are responsible for two-thirds more childcare per day than men in UK households. Recent evidence from the increased childcare demands on working parents during the COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrates that the additional childcare

disproportionately affected mothers. This finding was independent of the relative pre-pandemic salary of parents, meaning even when mothers were the primary earner, additional childcare demands were more likely to affect their paid work than their lower-earning partner (Andrew et al. 2021b, 2021c).

The overall paucity of benefits that support applicants with childcare responsibilities in secondary headteacher applicant packs is discouraging, as such benefits are more likely to appeal to and support female candidates than their male peers.

Implications of findings and recommendations for enhanced recruitment practice

This is the first study that has evaluated secondary headteacher recruitment materials as a possible institutional mechanism that contributes to the persistent gender disparity in UK teaching leadership. School governors and leaders have made significant efforts to eliminate bias from headteacher interview selection panels (James et al. 2019), but this does not address the issue of improving the gender diversity of the pool from which candidates are short-listed for interview selection.

Previous research demonstrates that small changes to recruitment materials can subtly signal who does and does not belong in the role being advertised. Therefore, our main aim was to critically analyse secondary headteacher recruitment materials to determine any features that could consistently attract or deter female applicants, and thereby surface evidence-based recommendations that could help diversify the gender of the prospective candidate pool. Following the critical analysis of 59 secondary headteacher applicant packs, we find evidence that suggests recruitment materials constitute an institutional mechanism that could contribute to sustaining gender inequality in headship, as they contain features more likely to deter female candidates and contribute to the gender pay gap. Further, we found recruitment materials consistently omit features more likely to appeal to and support female candidates, especially those with childcare responsibilities.

Conclusion and future research agenda

Gronn (2002) proposed the concept of 'designing' teaching leaders via leadership preparation standards, with these standards framed as a leadership 'customisation' tool. Taken together, our findings implicitly suggest that recruitment materials could act as a tool that 'designs out' particular types of prospective candidates, and thus particular types of leaders. This is important as it is within the scope of school governors and leaders designing headteacher jobs to take relatively straightforward steps to change practice and generate more inclusive and accessible recruitment materials.

Our research suggests school leaders designing headteacher jobs lack adequate training and/or awareness of existing guidance and support in fair recruitment and the surrounding EDI issues in order to improve practice. This is consistent with James et al. (2019) who explored Chairs of Governing Boards experiences of headteacher recruitment and found they '*felt daunted*' especially because of '*the lack of guidance*' (p. 9). It is notable that the DfE (2017) do not prioritise headteacher recruitment or selection in their competencies for Governors, instead requiring a general understanding of school staff recruitment and retention (DfE 2017, 18).

Our findings highlight the scope for improved headteacher recruitment practice in the following areas:

- Low prevalence of flexible working opportunities;
- Difficulty in searching for roles offering flexible working opportunities;
- Difficulty in locating flexible working information in applicant packs;
- Negotiable and broad salary bands;
- Paucity of positive action statements and schemes in job adverts;
- Definitive documents which use gender-biased wording;
- Overly complex and lengthy applicant packs;
- Inconsistent Job Descriptors;
- Inconsistent, unrealistic and ambiguously assessed Person Specifications;
- Low prevalence of specific employee benefits that support applicants with childcare responsibilities.

We suggest that these areas should inform a future research agenda that outlines goals, priorities and areas of investigation in order to strengthen our knowledge base on the limiting factors of headship, gender and educational leadership both in England and around the globe.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Helen Hooper received a BSc (Molecular Biology and Biochemistry) and PhD (Molecular Biology and Genetics) from Durham University. Helen is an academic at Northumbria University with research interests in educational development and student employability. Helen has held a range of academic roles, including departmental Equality Diversity and Inclusion lead and chaired the departmental Self-Assessment Team which successfully applied for Athena Swan (Bronze) recognition. The lack of research and evidence-based recommendations surrounding, improving the gender diversity of the applicant pool for academic positions which emerged as part of the Athena Swan application process directly led to a research interest in policy and processes focussed on gender equity in HE.

Nicola Cowley received a BSc (Biomedical Science), MSc (Microbiology) and PhD (Molecular Biology, Biochemistry and Veterinary Parasitology) from Northumbria University. As a research technician at Sunderland University, Nicky also has research interests in gender equity in the biosciences.

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