Article

The Tenure Track Model: Its Acceptance and Perceived Gendered Character

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Abstract: This article is concerned with the tenure track (TT) model, which has become increasingly used to extend the period of early career academics' probation from one to five years across the EU. This article focuses on the TT in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), the oldest and most prestigious university in Ireland, one where gender equality has been embedded more consistently and where the pace of change has been faster than in other Irish universities. Drawing on interviews with thirteen men and women in three faculties, all but one of whom had successfully achieved tenure, this article explores their acceptance of the TT model and the perceived relevance of gender. Men were more likely to accept the model and less likely to see it as gendered. Even those women who identified a lack of clarity around maternity leave and/or gender differences in negotiating 'fixed' starting salaries did not identify a systemic gender issue but blamed themselves. Women who were 'outsiders' to TCD and in the arts, humanities and social science faculty were most likely to be critical of the model. The findings suggest the importance of a cautionary appraisal of TT, even in institutions that have actively sought to enhance gender equality.

1. Introduction

The League of European Research Universities [1] (p3) defines the tenure track model 'as a fixed-term contract advertised with the perspective of a tenured, i.e., permanent, position at a higher level, subject to positive evaluation and without renewed advertising of and application for the next position'. Thus, LERU envisaged that, provided certain criteria are met, those on the tenure track (TT) will obtain a permanent position at a higher level after a fixed period on contract. This accords with the TT model as it originated in the United States [2] in contrast to, for example, the United Kingdom. LERU [1] (p.20) noted that 'Undeniably, a tenure-track programme constitutes a structured and accelerated path for those aspiring to an academic career' while recognising the need to ensure that academic career paths offset existing gender-based disadvantages. Drawing on the available documentary evidence as well as on qualitative interviews with men and women on the TT in one Irish university, this paper explores that assumption, focusing on the extent to which those who experienced the TT accept the model and/or see it as gendered. There has been no previous research on this topic in Irish higher educational institutions (HEIs). The article also raises the question of whether a tenure track system will promote the institutional transformation essential to the promotion of gender equality in higher education.

It is important to recognise that in Ireland, unlike, for example, in the United States [3] the tenure track model is only one of the ways of accessing permanent positions. In Ireland, as elsewhere, those on the TT avoid the plethora of fixed-term, contract positions, which are a consequence of increasing numbers of Ph.D. graduates trying to access a limited number

of permanent academic positions [4]. However, the higher education system in Ireland is much smaller and less differentiated than in the United States, with implications for the appropriateness of a TT model. Its roots in Ireland can be traced back to the OECD report [5] (p64), which favoured 'making the probation period longer and the granting of tenure more rigorous'. No national data are available on the number of HEIs that have introduced a TT. Anecdotally, it appears to have become more common since 2015–2016, when it offered HEIs a pragmatic solution to the state-imposed Employment Control Framework, which limited the number of permanent posts that could be created despite very large increases in student numbers.

Acknowledging the increasing popularity of the TT system in the European Union (EU), Pekkola and Siekkinen [6] (p2) suggested that it has become 'a fad', while Geschwind et al. [7] suggested that its real purpose is to extend early career academics' probationary period from one year to five years. Rationales for it are plentiful and include the attraction of 'the best' international candidates; giving an international profile to the university; providing a standardized career progression; increasing academics' productivity and quality; supporting professional development; decreasing organisational recruitment risks; and reaching policy goals such as gender balance, fairness and transparency [8,9]. However, most of these objectives could be achieved without the TT. General criticisms of the tenure process centre around accountability; blocking new recruitment; protecting unproductive faculty; and specific criticisms of TT models, which typically privilege research [10].

Pekkola and Siekkinen [6] (p1) implicitly assume that the TT is 'a career path towards a position of full professor', as it is in Finland [8]. Unlike the US and Finnish TT models, in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), the subject of this paper, the TT model involves an initial five-year fixed-term contract with a view to permanency, subject to annual performance reviews, but with no commitment to appointment or promotion to a level above the recruitment level of assistant professor.

2. Managerialism and Performativity

Neoliberalism is a political ideology and a form of governmentality [11] that favours market deregulation and reductions in government spending. Lynch [12] (p1) suggested that 'New Managerialism represents the organisational arm of neoliberalism'. In HEIs, it has been reflected in reduced state funding but increased state control; in the commodification and commercialisation of knowledge; in the centralisation of power; the decline in collegial structures and processes; the prioritisation of science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM); and an increased focus on key performance indicators, particularly in research, with global league tables and global rankings becoming part of a new mode of market governance [13]. Bozzon et al. [14] (p26) note that: 'the discourse of 'excellence' is the predominant mantra ... (and) the key category through which performances are measured in scientific organisations and staff are selected'. The assumption that these are objective and gender-neutral has been challenged [15–21]. Geschwind et al. [7] (p.433) conclude that managerialism places 'an increased focus on performance in an academic sphere that is viewed as a competitive market yet still run as an academic oligarchy', implicitly underlining the persisting importance of an academic elite operating informally and stealthily [22] despite the rhetoric of objectively defined competitive excellence.

Carvalho and Santiago [23] (p. 339) raise the question of the extent to which the top-level ideological commitment to managerialism 'truly touches HEIs' *shop floors'* (sic). Barry et al. [24] showed that academics found ways of accommodating, resisting and negotiating with it; while a small qualitative STEM study in an Irish HEI found that no one actively embraced it, with male academics constituting the majority of those who pragmatically accepted it [25]. Thomas and Davies [26] (p390) suggested that the discourses and practices favoured by managerialism included 'masculine discourses of competitiveness, instrumentality and individuality, which conflict(ed) with feminine discourses of empathy, supportiveness and nurturing'. This led some women, particularly in the older, more traditional universities, to experience criticism and anxiety, while others drew on the 'cul-

tural scripts of femininity' to critically reflect on and critique the highly masculinist subject positions offered' [26] (p.391)]. Indeed, Harford [27] found that the women professors she studied in Irish HEIs made a strategic choice not to engage in senior management roles (i.e., Dean level or above) because they were not comfortable with what they saw as the gendered managerialist corporate culture and the consequent devaluing of engagement with students [28]

Much research has been done on the gendering of access to senior positions, including the criteria used and their operationalisation, as well as the practices that differentially position men and women as the obvious 'next-level' candidates, including workload allocation, sponsorship, organisational culture, and networking [29–33]. However, with a small number of notable exceptions (such as [7,34,35] less work has been done on the early career stage.

It is clear that gendered practices may exist at different levels in the TT process, including in the gender profile of the disciplines where the TT posts are located, which can be seen as 'a site of political struggle' [36]. Research has also focused on the criteria used for selection and individual women's experience of the TT. Herschberg et al. [34] recognised the possibility that tacit criteria (including confidence) may be gendered. There has been a tendency to attribute gender differences in TT outcomes to maternity in general and/or to stopping the tenure clock during maternity. However, Fox and Gaughan [35] found that, based on 2012 survey data (involving 3688 US faculty members in four STEM areas: biology, biochemistry, maths and civil engineering), stopping the tenure track clock made no difference to either men's or women's possibility of obtaining tenure. Being a woman and stopping the tenure clock (or having children before obtaining tenure) had an adverse impact on women's chances of attaining full professorship, often many years later. Thus, this measure, which was intended to level the playing field for women, had a disproportionately negative effect on their future careers, though it was gender-neutral in terms of its immediate impact on tenure.

Geschwind et al. [7] found that over the period 2002–2015, almost three-quarters of those recruited to STEM through the TT were men, with internally appointed men being significantly more content with the process than women or those recruited externally. Both of the latter groups experienced difficulties in being included in the informal life of the community and in obtaining access to resources held by senior male professors (including financial resources for Ph.D. students, networking, etc.). Internal male candidates had a significant advantage both in knowing how things worked and in accessing research collaborations. In that study, female academics were over-represented among the dropouts and had longer periods of sick leave [7]. Several were critical of what they described as 'an excessive belief in genius' and a lack of clarity and managerial knowledge of the promotion process.

There is also evidence that female academics in STEM have low levels of gender awareness [37,38] and require tailored interventions [39], which identified 'systemic and invisible discrimination against women') so as to improve 'understanding of the causes, consequences, and potential solutions for gender inequality in STEM' [40]. The typical lack of gender awareness in these areas may reflect the purported objectivity of their disciplines; the relative status and other advantages enjoyed by women there relative to other disciplines, and/or the perceived stigma of identifying as women rather than as scientists. A focus on gender inequality could be seen as challenging the position of men in these male-dominated structures, thus ultimately triggering hostility and negative stereotyping. The extent to which such attitudes are common in other junior faculty is unclear.

Based on the literature, the authors hypothesise that men are more likely than women to be accepted on to the TT; that 'outsiders' to a HEI are more likely to problematise managerialism and experience greater difficulties than 'insiders', with female 'outsiders' being in a particularly fraught position; and that awareness, by TT appointees, of the gendered character of the model is likely to be uneven.

3. Context: Ireland and TCD

Ireland has been described as a 'prototypical neoliberal state' since the 1970s [41] (p.372). However, the impact of neoliberalism on HEIs did not begin until the 1990s, becoming embedded at different times and, to varying degrees, in particular Irish universities [13,41,42]. Trinity College Dublin (TCD) is the oldest, most prestigious and highest-ranked university in Ireland. In many ways, it can be seen as resisting managerialism by retaining collegial processes, such as the election of the provost/rector and faculty deans. However, reflecting the way in which managerialism affects internal processes [41], the proposal to introduce a TT was mooted by the vice provost/chief academic officer (VP/CAO) in a memo to the Equality Committee [43] with TT positions in 2015/16 referred to as Usshers II. The official rationale for the introduction of a TT was the attraction of internationally competitive early-career academics and their enhanced professional development with the provision of mentoring and evaluation through a 'rigorous, consistent and fair process' [43] (p.2). It was not clear why these objectives necessitated a TT. There was no recognition of: the power dimension implicit in a five-year probation period; its potential consequences [44]; nor of the underlying assumption that academics needed to be 'motivated' by insecurity and fear of losing their job in order to 'perform.'

There is evidence that men are more likely to apply and to be successful in TT processes [7]. This may be because of the disciplines where tenure track appointments are located and/or the specific ways they are framed. In the case of TCD, the underrepresentation of women in the 2016–2017 TT pool is striking: 'only 26 per cent of the 38 (TT) appointees were women, due to the higher concentration of the posts created in the STEMM schools (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine) (26 out of 38). Of these, only one of the 17 appointees in FEMS (Faculty of Engineering, Maths and Science) and 4 of the 9 in the FHS (Faculty of Health Sciences) were female' [45] (p. 25).

In Ireland, there has been a more or less consistent focus nationally on gender inequality since 2014, when the Equality Tribunal [46] provided unequivocal evidence of the systemic nature of gender inequality, concluding that Micheline Sheehy Skeffington had been discriminated against by the University of Galway in the 2008 promotion competition. It recommended her promotion to senior lecturer, awarding her €70,000. She gave this money to the campaign for the five other women who had been shortlisted but not promoted in that competition (settlements were reached with all of these by 2018). Three EU-funded projects, INTEGER at Trinity College Dublin, GENOVATE at University College Cork, and FESTA at the University of Limerick, were engaged in promoting transformational institutional change in gender equality internally and/or through putting pressure on the Higher Education Authority (HEA: the statutory umbrella body providing funding and strategic direction).

These various elements culminated in a wide range of national gender equality initiatives, including the introduction of the Athena SWAN Charter (2014) driven by INTEGER in TCD; the Expert Group Review (2016); the Gender Equality Taskforce (2018); the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (2019); research funding agency initiatives (2016-); and actions around sexual harassment and gender-based violence (2019-) [45,47].

After 429 years, women became rectors/presidents of Irish public universities, with TCD one of the six of the 12 Irish universities now headed by a woman compared with less than a quarter across the EU: [48,49]. The academic career hierarchy in TCD involves four positions: assistant professor (equivalent to lecturer: 49 per cent women); associate professor (equivalent to senior lecturer: 37 per cent women); professor in (equivalent to associate professor: 43 per cent women), and chair/ professor of (equivalent to full professor: 33 per cent women), broadly similar to the national pattern of 52 per cent; 42 per cent; 40 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively [48] Since 2012, the pace of change in the proportion of women at the full professorial level in TCD has been faster than in any other Irish university, and gender-balanced representation in the decision-making structures has been more consistent [19]. In TCD, the TT model occurs only at recruitment

to the assistant professor level, and there is no automatic link between TT and promotion to associate professor.

4. Methodology

The authors adopted a feminist institutional perspective, seeing gender operating at both the structural and cultural, formal and informal levels. Feminist institutionalism [50] (p.580) sees gender as constituting 'social relations based upon perceived (socially constructed and culturally variable) differences between women and men, and as a primary way of signifying (and naturalising) relations of power and hierarchy'.

Drawing on available documentary evidence and individual interviewing, the article explores who is selected for the TT as well as the appointees' initial expectations and evaluation of the TT system; their perception of the supports available; the gendering of the procedures and processes (including experience of maternity/paternity leave); and the overall impact of the TT on their motivation and career expectations. In addition, since the attraction of 'internationally competitive career academics' was a key part of the rationale for TT, interviewees were asked to provide a brief indication of their academic career histories (including current position, undergraduate and postgraduate education, post-doc appointments, and their expected academic position in five and ten years' time).

The sample was selected by identifying women Ussher assistant professors, from the web, who were appointed through the TT process and pairing them, as far as possible, with men from the same faculty, substituting where necessary. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Computer Science and Statistics. A total of 24 TT appointees were selected and invited to be interviewed. Thirteen interviews were completed: six with men and seven with women, spread across the three faculties: the predominantly male faculty of Engineering, Maths and Science (FEMS: two men; one woman); the more female faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science (FAHSS: two men and four women), and the predominantly female faculty of Health Sciences (FHS): two men and two women). There were two refusals (both men), and the remaining nine were contacted but did not respond, despite at least two reminders. Interviews were conducted, taped and transcribed online; potential breaches of anonymity were identified; and draft transcripts were then provided to interviewees who had the opportunity to amend them to further protect their anonymity.

Interviews lasted 25–79 minutes (with the average being just under 48 minutes), and in all but one case, both authors were present. Following the interviews, themes were identified, and interview notes were typed up highlighting these. This article focuses mainly on respondents' replies to questions about their prior expectations and experiences of the TT process, what they saw as its advantages and disadvantages for them personally, and whether they saw gender as having any impact on the process in their own case or in the case of others. Two themes were identified in the analysis: firstly, their acceptance of the managerialist model, and secondly, their perception of the relevance of gender to the TT process. In presenting the qualitative data, revealing characteristics are obscured: pseudonyms and faculty designations (FAHSS, FEMS, FHS) are used, with those who had educational or occupational experiences at TCD prior to their TT appointment being identified as 'insiders', and those who had not being referred to as 'outsiders'.

Most of the interviewees started on the TT in 2016–2017, and all but one had completed the TT process and obtained tenure. The majority of those who had completed tenure had worked as researchers/post-docs after their Ph.D. and before starting on their five-year TT, for periods ranging from less than a year to 12 years, with an average of 4–5 years. There was little difference in the mean for men/women. Hence, their road to a permanent position, even after their Ph.D., was very long indeed. Five of the seven women who obtained tenure took maternity leave during the TT process. A total of 10 out of 13 had applied for accelerated advancement, with only 2 being successful (several did not realise when they applied that they could only do so once). Most were not aware of the possibility of Fellowship in TCD, an honorary title, without financial remuneration. Only three had

applied successfully for this (two women and one man). A total of 6 of the 13 interviewees (three men and three women) had been born outside Ireland. Six were 'outsiders' in that they had no prior educational or occupational experiences at TCD, with the remainder being defined as 'insiders' in these terms.

We now explore the two themes that emerged from the analysis: acceptance of the managerialist TT model and perceptions of the relevance of gender to the TT process.

5. Acceptance of the Managerialist TT Model?

A managerialist ethos is reflected in the very real possibility of not obtaining tenure (as for example, in the United States). Most of the men accepted the TT model with its competitive ethos, performativity and commodification. Acceptance by the women of the model was much less unanimous, with some of them expressing serious reservations about it. The insider men in FHS were particularly likely to be comfortable with it: 'I think my expectations were that it would be tough, competitive. I expected to be with peers who would be, you know, at the top of their game at that level' (David, FHS, insider). The experience of the TT model implicitly reinforced their positive evaluation of themselves: 'I think for the university it is really a good discriminating factor between high quality people and people who maybe they don't want' (Frank, FHS, insider).

Insofar as any of the women referred to competitiveness, it was with relief that the system in TCD was less competitive than in the US. Thus, Sandra (FHS, insider) was familiar with the US tenure system with its possibility of failure: 'That you are sent off and then you have to redo it'. She saw the TCD TT as 'better' because this possibility did not exist: 'Obviously it's better here that that doesn't happen'. Even those men who felt that 'not knowing whether you've met the nebulous criteria' was 'quite stressful' went on to identify with the university's perspective and basically accepted the TT model with its focus on deliverables:

> 'Look, I fully understand it from the College's point of view. I mean they don't want to keep anybody on or give some sort of position of permanence to somebody that's not going to be a persistently deliverable person' (Frank, FHS, insider)

Others also saw the TT as confirming their membership in the institution:

> 'When you can say: 'Yes I have tenure' then it feels even more secure because you feel kind of like: 'Yes I've passed some kind of bar, and now I'm kind of part of the mechanism of the institution and not just someone who works here' (Paul, FAHSS, outsider)

Both men and women stressed that one of the advantages of the TT was that it focused their mind on outputs:

> 'Publishing articles . . . .and organising outreach events and obviously teaching. It's what I was doing anyway . . . . I felt like it was kind of enabling me to do what I was wanting to do' (Paul, FAHSS, outsider)

However, Jennifer (FAHSS, outsider) was ambivalent about the pressure: 'I don't know whether that added pressure is good or not', but she noted that 'without that kind of deadline looming' she might not have managed to publish papers. However, the limited TT time frame meant that there was pressure to go for speed of publication. Thus, she went for 'a journal that's maybe below the quality of the paper'. Sandra (FHS, insider) suggested that the TT annual reviews provided an opportunity to reflect and helped to prepare her for other evaluation processes, such as promotion:

> 'You know it's going to be evaluated quite strictly on 40% research, 40% teaching, 10% contribution to the school and 10% contribution to the discipline. I think the advantages are doing that annual reflection'(Sandra, FHS, insider)

Others explicitly recognised that the TT track involved both good and bad pressure:

'There's good pressure to it, that you drive your career forward: we had our yearly reviews, we had to meet certain criteria going into that final review interview. I came out of tenure track with a huge momentum, with research and leadership roles under my belt and you know, my outputs were high . . . On the negative side I do think there's a lot of pressure on people in tenure track and you maybe don't take all your annual leave, and you don't take holidays because in the back of your mind, you're constantly thinking about getting tenure and progressing your career'(David, FHS, insider)

Thus, although David recognised the negative implications of this model for work-life balance, he accepted it to the extent of not taking his full annual leave. Frank (FHS, insider) stressed that while 'I don't take any holidays', he did take two weeks of holidays instead of paternity leave when his partner had a baby:

'I actually just took off two weeks holidays rather than paternity leave, because I was told the process for applying for it (paternity leave) was just so weighty, like all the application forms . . . ..And I said: 'Look, I don't have the time. It's just not worth it . . . it's two weeks'

Thus, officially, there is no record of him taking paternity leave and hence no trigger to question the kind of 24/7 total commitment that is implicitly expected of those in scientific research [51]. Women's very different experiences around maternity leave are outlined in the next section.

For those who accepted the managerialist model, the advantage of TT was that it opened up a career path: 'you could see a path to a permanent position, and it was kind of, getting a foot in the door, more or less' (John, FEMS, insider). While he recognised the 'risk that they may not keep you on', he had reduced the pressure by finding out from senior people he knew in TCD that the intention was to keep everyone on. Even where men recognised the pressure in the TT, they were not daunted by it: 'There is pressure for sure. Yeah, don't get me wrong but it's not terrible. I mean, right, its reasonable' (Michael, FHS, outsider).

The main disadvantage of TT in TCD as perceived by these women and men was that, unlike the US system, it did not guarantee promotion to associate professor:

'Something that is peculiar about Trinity's system and frustrating for me, and so many other people I know, is the way tenure is decoupled from promotion . . . . You can do the whole tenure track process successfully without getting promoted' (Jeff, FAHSS, outsider)

Similarly, David (FHS, insider) felt that: 'I don't think you should . . . .have to go for promotion again, particularly if you've met the criteria at that final interview'. Sandra (FHS, insider) asked: 'If you are meant to have achieved all this high achieving stuff, should you not automatically be promoted with that?'. Hence, for her, not leading to promotion was a negative attribute of the TT. Even for many of those who accepted the model, it was perceived as an anti-climax, since:

'You get permission to do the job you've been doing for five years . . . . I can see why it's a bonus for the university, because the university gets to have basically a long interview, like a five-year interview and then if you're no good, they just say thanks but no. For the actual candidate it's an awful lot of jeopardy – a long period of jeopardy' (Paul, FAHSS, outsider)

Some of the women had much greater reservations about the TT model. Susan (FAHSS, outsider) totally rejected it. Her situation was exacerbated by clear procedural failures in the system (including the failure to allocate her a mentor until year 3) and inadequate and inconsistent communications within and between HR and her Head of School. In this situation, TT: 'pushed me into survival mentality, where I was constantly terrified that I'd not have a job at the end of this'. She resented having to focus on her own financial survival and her career: 'instead of thinking 'is this really good scientific research? Is it going to

benefit society?'. Instead, she felt that she was 'pushed into constantly thinking: 'is this going to get me a permanent job?'. She described herself as:

> 'Really self-motivated. I love my work and I do it because I think it matters and that's why I got into it. I didn't get into it for my own career . . . . And yet the system constantly pushes you to think about (that) and it's the wrong thing' (Susan, FAHSS, outsider)

She was critical of the way people were treated by the system: 'there's no sense of them really caring about us. You feel like a bit of a cog in a wheel – you're quite disposable, if you don't measure up, then we'll just find somebody else'. As she sees it, 'That's no way to motivate people and make them feel good about their work'. Implicit in her responses is a complete rejection of the discourse of commodification. This can be contrasted with others' absorption of that discourse when referring to the advantages of the TT:

> 'I really think it orientates and inspires you to set up a set of deliverables . . . it really orients you towards making yourself of personal value within the university . . . . It put a deadline to become a person of demonstrable value within the university, in order to be assessed' (Frank, FHS insider)

The TT model was also implicitly rejected by Olive (FHS, insider), a woman with a very long occupational track record. Thus, when asked about her expectations, she said that: 'I thought I was going to be, you know, minded a lot more than I was . . . .(instead) I felt like I was thrown in the deep end'. Nancy (FAHSS, insider) was conflicted. In principle, she accepted the idea of the TT system: 'I don't see anything wrong with the TT system, as long as it is clearly communicated with a clear career path', but (similar to Olive, FHS, insider) she goes on to be critical of the competing expectations between prioritising a focus on research, reflected in applying for grants and publishing, and a focus on teaching, which she saw as crucial for being promoted: 'So the disadvantage would be not with the TT but the lack of consistency and transparency' (Nancy, FAHSS, insider). However, this led her to reflect that she does not understand the real rationale for the TT system:

> 'There's a whole layer of stuff to force people to produce . . . . A whole other layer of hurdles that they need to cross in order to make sure that they're actually, you know, productive members of staff' (Nancy, FAHSS, insider)

Several other women were critical of the content and/or transparency of the criteria in the TT model. Diana (AHSS, outsider) saw the criteria for achieving tenure as an assistant professor as the same as those required for the next career rung as an associate professor. Similar to Rosemary (FEMS, insider), she was critical of the fact that applicants were not told the criteria until after they had signed the TT contract. However, at that stage, Rosemary (FEMS, insider) felt that she received 'a clear list with clear numbers . . . . so, I could know exactly what to aim for, what counts and what doesn't count', Diana (AHSS, outsider) did not think this. She noted that, in some faculties, the criteria involved expectations that funding would be achieved, which she saw as inappropriate at the TT level, while in other faculties, such as FAHSS, the criteria indicated that an application for funding should be submitted, and she asked: 'what does that mean? . . . what kind of funding? Does that have to be external funding? Is internal funding enough? Is a small grant enough? There is no clarity'.

There were occasional complaints by the men about the level of resources provided for TT appointees. Both Michael (FHS, outsider) and Frank (FEMS, insider) recognised that while there was no seed funding at all available, they had an opportunity to apply for external funding of €20,000 which, if they were successful, would be matched by their faculty/school. However, they saw the absence of substantial funding as posing particular difficulties for those who were developing a new research area and/or who needed people to work for them in a laboratory situation. Nevertheless, their overall evaluation of the TT was very positive.

Several of the respondents, both men and women (including Sandra, FHS, insider; Diana, FAHSS, outsider; Frank, FHS, insider), highlighted the negative implications of a five-year contract for obtaining a mortgage: 'It was their (the bank's) lack of understanding of how it was possible to have a five-year appraisal period that actually ended up with me getting the mortgage' (Frank, FHS, insider). The lack of job security was seen as a particular problem for female international academic staff since these were less likely to have family and other kinds of local informal supports:

> 'For people that want to have a family, having security in a job is of paramount importance . . . . This problem is very pressing for women . . . . They wait until they have a permanent contract before having children.' (Diana, FAHSS, outsider)

Indeed, Sandra (FHS, insider), one of such local interviewees, noted that, although she had failed to obtain a creche place for over six months after the end of her maternity leave, she was able to return to work because her parents, who lived locally, stepped in. As Diana noted, such supports were rarely available to international academics.

In summary, the TT managerialist model was broadly accepted by the men, with insider men in predominantly female areas (FHS) particularly embracing its competitive ethos. Caveats were more likely to be expressed by the women, with the TT model being completely rejected by a female FAHSS outsider (Susan). These findings reinforce those of Thomas and Davies [26] (2002), Harford [27] (2018), and Leathwood [28] (2017), with none of these focusing explicitly on the TT in Irish HEIs.

6. Perceptions of the Relevance of Gender to the TT Process?

Typically, those who are privileged in terms of gender, ethnicity, etc., are not aware of that privilege. Hence, it was not surprising that most of the men saw gender as having no impact on the TT process. One of them did recognise his own structural and cultural position but considered only the possible negative effects of gender for women: 'For myself, no (gender had no impact). I'm like, very privileged. I'm, you know, a white male in FEMS' (a predominantly male area), and he went on to refer to possible implications for women taking maternity leave:

> 'I'm aware of someone going on maternity leave and she was quite concerned with how that would work out with the tenure process . . . It's a substantial block of time to take out from five years and her research, obviously it stalled a little bit' (John, FEMS, insider)

David (FHS, insider) did notice that most TT Usshers II appointees in 2016–2017 were men but did not think that gender impacted the TT process: 'it was all, you know, it was about your outputs in your work. I don't think it (gender) was an issue'. Thus, although four men were placed on the TT track from engineering, this was explained in terms of the gender profile of the discipline. Frank (FHS, insider) also said he did not think gender had any impact: 'I mean, I can't imagine how. I don't know behind the scenes but all I can say is, it certainly wasn't overt'. Paul (FAHSS, insider) initially rejected the idea that gender had any impact on the TT process but went on to say that: 'I mean maybe I haven't thought of it this way'. He went on to recall that the first person to leave the TT was a woman but suggested that this was because 'she got a better offer . . . . She said the (TT) conditions were ridiculous', implying that those who stayed, not those who left, were disadvantaged.

The TT model is overseen by those in line management positions, such as heads of departments, schools, and faculty. For Jeff (FAHSS, outsider), who was in a predominantly male discipline, the TT was 'lower stress than I expected', and he compared his teaching commitments and contact hours favourably with those from his personal experience in North American universities. However, he also noted that: 'The head of department did a very good job, kind of insulating me from the excess of admin responsibilities'. He later stressed that the most important thing in enabling him to obtain tenure was that: 'The teaching and admin load I had was manageable and left me with the time and resources that I needed to be very productive in my research' (Jeff, FAHSS, outsider). Thus, he

suggested that the critical factor may not only be the support of the head of department but the resourcing of the department, which made 'insulating' the TT appointee possible. In contrast, Olive (FHS, insider), from a predominantly female department, noted that in addition to being expected to focus on research, she received 'a whack load of teaching' since they wanted someone to conduct 'lots of supervision and lots of classes . . . There was a huge amount', in addition to being required to develop a new Masters' degree in the first year and to subsequently become its co-ordinator: 'I found it very stressful . . . . . . I always felt that I was running with two jobs'. Predominantly female areas of employment, including those in academia, are notoriously under-resourced. Neither of these respondents considered that this gendered factor might be in any way related to their experiences.

The women's responses around the importance of gender were more varied than, and generally very different from, those of their male counterparts. Some of the women specifically endorsed a meritocratic model and dismissed the relevance of gender:

> 'Gender just doesn't, it doesn't bother me at all . . . . I think there may have been only three females (in the TT intake) but it didn't really bother me. It's the best person for the job is my model. But whether I'm female, I don't think it has made any difference' (Olive, FHS, insider)

Olive thus implicitly suggests that the reason women were under-represented in the intake was because they were not good enough and further suggests that gender was irrelevant. Sandra (FHS, insider) suggests that she is disembodied and that gender had no impact: 'I was treated like me, not like a male or female'.

There were two key issues that provoked some of the women to reflect on the impact of gender, having initially been hesitant or even denying that gender had any relevance. The first issue was maternity leave, and the second was around negotiating the starting salary. Jennifer (FAHSS, outsider) initially says that: 'it's hard to say I think to what extent it (gender) matters' but goes on to refer to 'the parental and maternity leave that I had taken' as something that made her situation 'tricky'. Rosemary (FEMS, insider) initially refers to her gender as neither an advantage or disadvantage, but goes on to note that: 'I think with other gender issues, like maternity, that's the only thing that affected me in terms of perception'. She later tempered this by saying that being a woman 'is definitely becoming an advantage, just to balance it out'. However, the lack of clarity surrounding maternity leave and its implications was recognised as an issue. For example, regarding how the criterion regarding a €100 k research grant was to be taken into account in maternity leave since the difficulty was obtaining the grant within the time limits, not the amount, she said:

> 'I didn't know where I stood with respect to some of the criteria. 'How far will I get with those certain criteria?' So, there was pressure . . . . to work during maternity leave, not to miss the chance to meet some of those criteria' (Rosemary, FEMS, insider)

Other women referred to anxiety arising from a lack of clarity around the consequences of taking maternity leave and meeting the criteria:

> 'It (TT) didn't create any formal barriers to me taking (maternity) leave, it just made it really anxious for me to take leave. We decided we wanted to have a baby. It was never going to be a good time to have it as I was always on a temporary contract . . . I was so afraid that everything I had worked so hard for could be taken away. I had no sense of how this (maternity leave) would be taken into account' (Susan, FAHSS, outsider)

She worked during her maternity leave: 'which I would not have wanted to do but felt I had to'. Some of her teaching was moved to after she came back from maternity leave, but she felt unable to challenge this: 'you can't stand up for yourself. You can't say this is really unfair, what's happening here? I'm not doing this' because you are on a temporary contract . . . there's no way you can risk it' (Susan, FAHSS, outsider). However, despite the obvious fact that only women go on maternity leave, she hesitated to identify gender as

having any impact on the TT process: 'I don't know really'. Nancy (FAHSS, insider) was also tentative about the impact of gender but said: 'I think, you know, possibly yes'. For her, however, the issue was not only maternity leave but the wider difficulty of combining paid work with childcare responsibilities.

The second issue, referred to by some interviewees, was that a number of men had negotiated a higher starting salary, although the salary was presented to entrants as non-negotiable. Rosemary (FEMS, insider) said that, in her school, two men on the TT negotiated this:

> 'I did not even think to negotiate, which is my own fault, but also partly we women do not do that generally. There is a gender difference there'.

Despite acknowledging the possibility that the structure is discriminatory, since it allowed men but not women to ignore the fixed-point starting salary, Rosemary blames herself: 'So you know, my own fault'. Similarly, although Jennifer (FAHSS, outsider) recognises that 'more than one man negotiated better', she is reluctant to name this as a gender-related issue and says that 'it's hard to say to what extent it (gender) matters for these internal decisions'.

Only one respondent explicitly referred to the impact of gender, seeing it as reflected in a tension between the tenure clock and the biological clock and, more broadly, in the impact of the male-dominated nature of the system:

> 'It's well known that, for women, it's always more difficult, and so tenure track is particularly penalising for women because of the tenure versus biological clock. It's penalising for historical reasons since the expectations are set by people who are men who don't understand what it means to be a woman in academia' (Diana, FAHSS outsider)

She recognised that: 'the openness of the academic market has meant that perhaps women have more opportunities abroad than they would have at home', but this very mobility meant that 'the bar is being pushed up because people who can't find jobs at home have to go abroad'. The net effect is that the pool of people competing for TTs is very high, and yet they all have to face a further five years of temporary contracts, with implications for their ability to start a family and take maternity leave: 'I feel I can't' (Diana, FAHSS, outsider).

In summary, there was still a general unwillingness to identify gender as impacting on the TT, reflecting earlier studies [37]. Women who recognised that maternity was an issue and/or those who noticed gender differences in negotiating 'fixed' starting salaries were most willing to tentatively recognise it, with the most explicit recognition of the impact of gender being by a female FAHSS outsider (Diana).

7. Summary and Conclusions

The TT has become increasingly common across the EU. This article focuses on the TT in TCD, the oldest and most prestigious university in Ireland, where the pace of change in the proportion of women at the full professorial level has been faster than in any other Irish university, and gender-balanced representation in the decision-making structures has been higher and more consistent. The Athena SWAN gender equality mark was also initiated by TCD, and it now has a woman provost/rector. This article draws on available documentary evidence relating to the TCD TT model, as well as interviews with 13 men and women in three faculties, all but one of whom had successfully completed the TT process and achieved tenure.

The first significant finding was the gendered outcome of the TT recruitment process. Women TT appointees accounted for only 26 per cent of the Ussher II assistant professors since 2016, despite the professed emphasis on recruiting on the basis of excellence. This suggests that, as predicted by Van den Brink [36], there are gendered practices operating in the management of the TT process. It also accords with the conclusions of Geschwind et al. [7] regarding gendered TT appointments, particularly in STEM disciplines.

Men in this study were more likely than women to accept the managerialist TT model, with its competitiveness being particularly lauded by male insiders in predominantly female areas, most notably in FHS. Some men and women did see TT as creating negative pressure, but the men appeared to be less daunted by that and dealt with it by adopting the perspective of the HEI or finding out informally that the intention was to retain those who completed the TT. Some women had greater reservations about the model and even regarded it as inhumane and uncaring [26,27], driven by questionable assumptions about what motivated academics. The most overt criticism of the model and/or of its gendered character was by female FAHSS outsiders, a finding that needs to be tested in further studies. Generally, as the men saw it, the TT opened up a career path. Even those who recognised that the TT gave them a focus on research outputs were critical of the content and/or lack of transparency in the tenure criteria. Interviewees highlighted their vulnerability as temporary contract workers and their fear that, if they became pregnant, they could lose everything they worked so hard for and hence felt under pressure to work during their maternity leave.

Reflecting the metaphorical blindness characteristic of hegemony, most of the men stressed that they saw no evidence that gender had any impact on the TT process. Thus, their workload allocations were not seen as gendered but as reflecting the attitudes/competencies of individual bosses. The women's responses were more varied, with some referring to the assumed existence of a meritocracy and others to a disembodied, non-gendered view of themselves. Even those women who identified a lack of clarity surrounding the impact of maternity leave on the fulfilment of the criteria for tenure or who perceived gender differences in negotiating 'fixed' starting salaries did not see this as a systemic gender issue. Rather, they blamed themselves. This indicates the silencing of a gendered discourse as an explanatory framework in Irish HEIs, even in TCD, which has been to the fore in leading on gender equality issues.

Availing of maternity leave did not impede the obtainment of tenure in TCD. This supports the findings of Fox and Gaughan [35]. However, the respondents' experiences of taking such leave were far from unproblematic. There was a good deal of agreement that the criteria guided them in their preparation for the annual reviews. However, these were not always consistently and fairly implemented across the three faculties, particularly in relation to workload allocation. Much uncertainty was attached to maternity leave and its possible negative impact on meeting the specific criteria. This could have a longer-term impact, necessitating further follow-up research to assess such an impact on career progression as identified in the US [35]. There was no evidence whatsoever that the TT promoted institutional transformation. Rather, the evidence suggested that it facilitated and, in some respects, heightened the gendered inequalities in the system and perpetuated their invisibility.

Another perceived flaw in the TCD TT model, in contrast to the US university practice, was that, at the end of the successfully navigated tenure track process, appointees were still assistant professors and needed to apply separately for promotion to associate professor. This was seen by male and female appointees as a strong source of dissatisfaction and frustration.

8. Limitations and Future Work

Although the numbers interviewed for this case study are small, reflecting the views and experiences of 34 per cent of the 38 TT appointees, the findings represent an important and cautionary appraisal of how TT works in practice in one institution that has actively sought to enhance gender equality and to foster career progression opportunities among underrepresented groups, including women [43]. It is likely that other Irish universities will introduce the TT. University College Dublin (UCD) has already introduced the Ad Astra scheme (2019), which is modelled closely on the TCD TT model. It would be interesting to undertake a comparative study to include the voices of those from that HEI along with those in TCD. It would also be useful to have national data on the use of the TT in all Irish

HEIs; on the gendered and disciplinary profile of those applying for and obtaining the TT, their experience of it, and the gendered/non-gendered character of their subsequent career outcomes, as compared with those not on TT in Irish HEIs [3,52].

This study is the first specific study of the TT in Irish HEIs. The overarching conclusions from it highlight the importance of challenging assumptions that it will create the kind of institutional transformation essential for creating gender equality. Rather, in its impact on reproducing those inequalities, it highlights the need for the monitoring, at sectoral as well as institutional levels, of the short-, medium-, and long-term gendered experience and outcomes of TT.

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