Historical Development of Women’s Underrepresentation in Academic Leadership in Nigeria: A Review of Literature

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Abstract: The historical context of women’s underrepresentation and efforts to address gender equity in Nigeria provides a background for understanding the gendered nature of academic leadership. Nigerian universities are largely male-dominated, with a wide gender disparity in academic leadership. Hegemonic cultures embedded within Nigerian society have continued to be reflected in institutional rules and practices within these academic environments. As Krook and Mackay (2011) stated, it is crucial to understand “gendered patterns and effects” to analyse institutional change. The primary questions central to this study are: what factors have necessitated and shaped women’s current relegated leadership status in the Nigerian academic space? What role has history played and what efforts have been made to redress the current gender imbalance in Nigerian universities? This study focuses on the significant issues and timelines relevant to women's underrepresentation in academic leadership.

Keywords: Women, underrepresentation, gender inequality, academic leadership, Nigeria

1. Tracing Women’s underrepresentation in Nigeria

Gender inequality in Nigeria has been problematic, with the patriarchal system having negative implications for women’s advancement to academic leadership positions. Aina et al. (2015) drew a link between Nigeria’s strong patriarchal cultures and gender equality gaps in Nigerian higher education, arguing that male dominance is substantive and creates gendered inequalities of power within higher education in Nigeria. Even though patriarchy in traditional societies allowed disparities and inequalities in power, reputation and access to resources (Ezumah, 2000), the colonial government heralded the Nigerian education system with distinct gender norms while developing its education agenda in the 19th century in terms of access and curriculum. Pre-colonial Nigeria had a traditional form of education which was in the form of oral teachings and transmission of skills (usually the predominant trade of a family) to children (mostly boys), in the form of farming, fishing, trading, tie and dye, handicrafts, black/gold-smiting among others (Aina, 2014, p. 3). Practical skills, particularly for girls, were in the form of housekeeping and the raising of children. Skills’ training was gendered back then, as distinctive gender roles existed across Nigeria’s cultural groups (Para-Mallam, 2006).

Tracing the establishment of education in Nigeria, Amadiume (1997), Awe (1991), Okome (2000), and Para-Mallam (2006) have described how the advent of Christianity, the Atlantic slave trade, the invasion of Islamic culture and the imperial capitalist system reshaped gender roles and relationships, bringing about significant social changes. Christian Missionaries introduced Western education in Nigeria with the Wesley Christian Missionaries’ arrival in 1842 in Badagry. Between 1842 and 1914, Christian Mission schools began to spring up, mainly in Southern Nigeria. These schools focused on four subjects—reading, writing, arithmetic and religion—to prepare people for their roles as evangelists, pastors, interpreters and teachers. The Mission schools, which started at the primary level, grew to secondary schools following local agitation and interests, especially in the Lagos state area (Aina, 2014, p. 4). Ironically, most of the early secondary schools were boys-only colleges, creating the first group of elites limited to unique locations that were mainly male (Aina et al., 2015). These were the citizens educated by the British colonial government to take over the reins of power at independence (Fafunwa, 1974). During these periods, the entrenchment of Western education in northern Nigeria became more complicated as the natives

1For example, Aina et al. (2015, p. 316) noted that most of the early secondary schools were established for only for boys who later took over the reins of power at the independence of Nigeria in 1960 from the British colonial Government. Even when the Girls Secondary School came into existence in 1879, the colonial administration had stressed clerical skills for boys and domestic science for girls in the school curriculum.
opposed Christian missionaries and the concept of Western education. By 1914, Western education eventually started in Northern Nigeria, but about 25,000 Quranic schools were already in existence (Mkpa, 2013).

The inclusion of females in the colonial educational system saw a few girls admitted to study programmes, mainly preparing them for domesticity and low-cadre roles. In Southern Nigeria, formal education organised for girls was mainly through the women’s guilds of various churches. The guilds were set up essentially for girls and women to acquire basic home economics, catering, sewing and other domestic skills (Aina et al., 2015). Subsequently, the pressure to boost female education led to the establishment of Queens College as a girls-only secondary school in 1927. In the school curricula, the colonial government instituted an education system that merely stressed clerical skills for boys and home management science for girls. In other words, the girls’ educational curriculum prepared them for domestic positions rather than being income earners. According to Aina et al., this was consistent with the colonial masters’ Victorian philosophy, which signified women’s place to be in the kitchen, while men governed the public sphere (2015, p. 296). As Agbaje (2019, p. 7) argued, “once colonialism was installed, rigid binaries, including those around gender perceptions, were imposed”. During this era, women preoccupied themselves with domestic issues and were to leave the work of ruling and running the society in terms of politics and economics in particular to the men (Denzier, 1998; Oguntuyi, 1979). In this way, colonialism introduced an European patriarchal construct based on a “monolithic male-gendered power system” (Amadiume, 1997), which undermined the material foundations for relative female autonomy. The colonial government laid the foundations of Nigeria’s educational system and heralded it with distinct gender norms.

Consequently, the first higher institution in Nigeria, Yaba Higher College, was established in 1934 and later became the Yaba College of Technology in 1947 (Aina, 2014, p. 4). When the Premier University was created in 1948, the students moved to Ibadan, the University of Ibadan’s nucleus. Out of the first 104 students admitted to the university, only three (3) were female. Essentially, university education in Nigeria is predominantly a colonial legacy. Scholars such as Adeniran (2008), Akinola (2018), Dogo (2014), Makama (2013) and Aina (2014) have argued that, in combination, the traditional patriarchal culture and colonial legacies in Nigeria laid the foundations for gender inequality, especially in the educational sector². Despite the widespread knowledge and acceptance of patriarchal culture and colonial legacies as the underlying cause of women’s relegated status within the Nigerian society, international, regional, and national governments have made efforts to advocate for creating a gender-balanced society. In the next section, I present an overview of efforts at creating and promoting gender equity in Nigeria, at the international, regional and national levels.

2. International Organisation, Regional Government and National Efforts at Promoting Gender Equity in Nigeria

Over the past decades, widespread “unequal” power relations have continued to receive the attention of national, regional and international governments (Olaogun et al., 2015, p. 295). An apparent upsurge in feminist organising and pressures by women’s groups across the world in the 1970s steered the development of gender research in most African countries (Mama, 2005). In particular, during the 1974 UN International Year of Women, the dire need to set up structures that address women’s participation in development was emphasised. The first World Conference on women, held in Mexico City in 1975, called for the establishment of national machinery to promote women’s status. In response to this, by 1976, Africa had pioneered regional structures for women, setting up programmes on women and development, and subsequently established the African Training and Research Centre for Women (ATRCW) (Pereira, 2002). The Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development put forward a cross-sectoral strategy in which it prioritised special and diverse training for women and the use of gender-inclusive curricula to facilitate their participation in all disciplines with particular emphasis on science, technology and industry. It also specified the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming policies, measures, and frameworks for increasing and improving education delivery through all tiers of government and relevant institutions of learning at all levels. The broader international women’s movement, thus, provided a forum for expressing African women’s perspectives.

²While education for women in the northern Nigerian region has been constrained by the influence of Islamic religion, patriarchy transcends geo-political regions in Nigeria, and this thesis is not concerned with explaining regional variation, but exploring norms within highly ranked research institutions, all of which are situated outside of the north.
To facilitate women’s academic and managerial development in Commonwealth universities, the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) began a women’s programme in 1985 to enhance women’s career development. Inspired by the ACU’s concern with equity, women’s participation, access and quality in higher education; the programme was established (ILO, 2010). The organisation saw the enhanced recruitment of women into academic management as vital to overall institutional growth, both in terms of equity and of quality (Lund, 1998; Singh, 2002b). In 1998, UNESCO convened a World Conference on Higher Education, where a panel of experts reviewed gender equality progress in higher education since the Beijing Conference in 1995 (Nyoni et al., 2017). The conference focused on the role of higher education in boosting the participation of women. In compliance with Article 4 of the “World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century”3, participants proposed that university chairs, professors and department heads be filled with more women by 2010 (Onsongo, 2011; UNESCO, 1998). Given this, Nigeria has ratified several international treaties and conventions designed to achieve gender justice across sectors (Aina, 2013). Table 1 identifies the most fundamental ones.

Table 1: International Conventions and Treaties Ratified by Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>International treaties or conventions ratified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>The United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>N International Year of Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>the creation of UNIFEM now called ‘UN Women’ allowed institutional recognition to the need for a focused approach to women’s empowerment at global and local levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>the UN General Assembly landmark Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Gender 21 of the Rio’s commitment which centrally placed women’s contribution in environment management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>the United Nations (UN) World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>ADC Declaration on Gender and Development and its Addendum on the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>N Millennium Development Goals, in particular, MDG3 on Gender Equality and women empowerment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-2015</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which also flags ‘Gender Equality and Women Empowerment’ as a priority goal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Aina (2014); Aina et al. (2015, p. 296); Gberevbie et al. (2014).

Regionally, many African nations had made enormous progress concerning commitments to gender equality in their constitutions, laws, and policies by the late 1970s. During this period, the growing networks of gender activist increasingly articulated women’s roles in African development. Mama (2003) highlighted the development of regionally based sites for gender and women’s research in Africa despite the disparities in colonial heritages and independence trajectories among diverse African countries. The three major issues identified by Bennett (2002, p. 38) as catalysts were: 1) the intellectual challenge arising from a near-complete absence of gender analysis as a critical tool of social research; 2) the trivialisation of women’s experiences and the implications of the outright conflation of the term person and the word man; and 3) the staggering triviality to “calls for research” which acknowledged the power of gender. The underrepresentation of women, coupled with the fluid knowledge of gender as an analytic concept, impacted knowledge production within the region (Imam et al., 1997; Pereira, 2004).

In 1977, the first regional institution—“Association of African Women for Research and Development” (AAWORD), was founded to encourage women researchers from Africa working on gender and development.

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3This called for the abolition of all gender inequalities in higher education at all levels and in all disciplines in which women are underrepresented (Nyoni et al., 2017).
issues. One of the main goals of AAWORLD was to set the agenda for feminism in Africa by promoting research and activism for African women scholars. AAWORLD’s establishment drew attention to women’s important role in academia throughout Africa and the relevance of women’s research to other political and intellectual developments (AAWORD, 1985). During this period, the Nigerian government also laid the foundations for social change by bringing the country into line with the United Nations (UN) gender initiatives. However, following prolonged military rule and the extreme marginalisation of women from public life and politics under authoritarian rule in Nigeria, the political space available at the national level to resolve violations against women became limited (Pereira, 2004, p. 655). As a result, women’s organisations enthusiastically pursued the UN platforms for advancing women’s rights in Nigeria. For example, the UN’s requirement for regular reporting on the implementation of a country’s ratified international agreements, such as the CEDAW, provided women-centred organisations with the ability not only to track government reports but also to provide alternative accounts through the Shadow Reports, as was the case in 1999 (West, 1999).

The guidelines for promoting gender issues in all aspects of national life were set in 2009 through the introduction of the African Gender Policy. The African Union (AU) approach to promoting women’s rights and gender equality, in particular, has been influenced in many ways by UN mechanisms and the African continent’s unique needs (Aina, 2014, p. 17). The African Gender Policy (2009) targeted the following issues: migration, family, sexual and reproductive health, social policy, the African youth charter, women’s rights and empowerment, gender violence, the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Program (CAADP), the AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality and other critical AU decisions, declarations and instruments having a bearing on the advancement of women and gender equality. Despite these measures, the weak implementation of the African gender policy, captured in Section 1.2 of the 2007 National Gender Policy, explicitly noted that “Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society where men control all aspects of women’s lives” (Federal Ministry of Women’s Affairs and Social Development, 2006). One context in which this was aptly expressed is in women’s representation (Otaru, 2015).

At the national level, gender and women’s empowerment had become buzzwords in the fourth republic, particularly within the media space and among civil/human rights groups and development agencies. Campaigns that included women and their rights to fair access, representation control over wealth, benefits, and opportunities were mounted (Para-Mallam, 2006). Over time, women’s struggle for inclusion and equality gained attention, especially in debates on progress, democratisation, human rights and good governance. As a result, many women’s rights movements focused on campaigning for changes to strengthen women’s socio-economic status. As women’s activism expanded, the drive for a Gender Agenda grew, thus drawing attention to the systematic essence of gender discrimination and its institutional causes and setting out social change strategies.

Consequently, the research environment on gender sprang up in the early 1980s. During these periods, activities in various women’s groups were organised within or outside the university environments. The formation of a national-based initiative and centres such as “Women in Nigeria” (WIN), founded in 1982, played increasingly significant roles in independent research and advocacy networks in Nigeria (Bennett, 2002). WIN emerged as a significant force to counteract the subordination and isolation faced by African-based women researchers and scholars (Pereira, 2004, p. 654). WIN’s objectives included complex integrated activities such as research, advocacy, policymaking, and information dissemination. The concerted effort created by members of these women activist groups galvanised feminist scholarship in Nigeria. It made case studies on the history, demography, ethnology, economic activity and legal status of women in Nigeria more widely available to researchers (Odejide, 2002).

As previously stated, Nigeria, like most other countries, is a signatory to most of the international treaties and conventions. Given this, the government made significant efforts in promoting gender through the creation of national machinery—the Ministries of Women’s Affairs at the Federal and the State levels and also creating gender desks/units in nearly all the government parastatals. As a result of the different regimes that have ruled the country since independence, the national machinery changed severally. For instance, between 1989 and 1998, the National Commission for Women, National Centre for Women Development and a Federal Ministry for Women Affairs and Social Development were established. In 2000, the Ministry of Women Affairs developed a “National Policy on Women” (NPW) in response to the call to integrate women into development. The Obasanjo Administration finally approved the National Policy on Women in July 2001. The NPW identified education (formal, vocational and informal) as a priority sector for intervention strategies for women empowerment, emphasising science and technology for the development and adaptation of indigenous technology to suit...
women’s needs. Accordingly, new development imperatives have continued to support the goal of gender equality, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the African Union Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality (National Gender Policy, 2007).

3. Gender Equity and Nigerian Universities

Institutions in Nigeria also incorporated gender into their strategic thinking and planning. For instance, the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan during a conference on Rural Women and Agriculture established critical initiatives, where presentations and conference proceedings centred on the need to create a research bureau and data bank as a key strategy for pooling existing work and improving women’s research. During the national conference, networks developed contributed to establishing an independent research centre named “Women’s Research and Documentation Centre” (WORDOC) in 1986. It was seen as a ground-breaking effort to systematically collect materials on women’s studies. WORDOC became an independent entity, pursuing distinct political and intellectual objectives. Therefore it acted as a civil organisation rather than a traditional academic entity, taking an activist approach to national and international issues. WORDOC’s autonomous management helped ensure consistency in its goals. While university departments, institutes, or centres often need to adapt to universities’ changing political and administrative requirements, WORDOC has consistently enjoyed a considerable measure of independence (Odejide, 2002). WORDOC has played a significant role in stimulating interest in women and gender studies in Nigerian universities by identifying priority areas in gender research and developing networks among researchers. They have also been instrumental in providing empirical information and intellectual and political guidelines for researchers and policymakers.

With gender research gaining increasing recognition and attention over the years, establishing Gender Centres (GCs) in Nigerian universities became necessary. It is important to note that before the establishment of gender centres/units in Nigeria, female academic activism was central due to the absence of the gendered realities of Nigerian universities. Efforts to transform both the institutional and intellectual gender cultures within Nigerian institutions yielded a scattering of gender centres and policy initiatives. The last three decades in Nigeria have witnessed the establishment of gender centres as a catalyst for promoting and strengthening teaching, research, documentation and institutionalisation of gender equality across Nigerian universities. However, only a few universities in Nigeria have established gender centres and/or have equity policies in place. Most of these GCs engage in research, teaching, training programmes’ advocacy and policy programme development. While this does not compare to over 600 such initiatives in the USA, it does signify a concerted effort within the African scholarly community (Mama, 2009).

The work of such centres is often transdisciplinary and transformative in its intentions. Of the 43 accredited federal universities in Nigeria, only 12 have dedicated gender centres/units, three have gender research groups, while four universities have prescribed gender policies in place. Table 2 shows a list of federal universities in Nigeria with gender centres/units/research groups and formal gender-related policy.

Table 2: Gender Centres in Nigerian Federal Universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal University</th>
<th>Gender Centre (GC)</th>
<th>Gender Research Group (GRG)</th>
<th>Gender Policy (GP)</th>
<th>Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy (ASHP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obafemi Awolowo University</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Ibadan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ahmadu Bello University</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Port Harcourt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bayero University, Kano</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal University of Technology, Akure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,</td>
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<td>Umudike</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal University of Technology, Owerri</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Gender centres in Nigerian universities range from being research, teaching and training sites to one that reinforces gender equality principles, policy and practice within the university. There are two categories of gender centre existing in Nigeria universities. These are categorised based on the centres’ roles and functions since they are designed to meet different purposes.

The first category are the Research and Teaching-Based Gender Centres, the core focus of which is research, teaching and advocacy. Included in this category are Gender Research Groups (GRG), which drive gender advocacy through teaching and research, with an active component of activism for gender equity. Typically, these centres have an agenda of providing intellectually rigorous teaching and research in gender studies rooted in the specific challenges presented by various African contexts. In practice, this means emphasising teaching (Mama, 2009) and research in pursuit of equality and justice in African contexts. Gender issues are incorporated into courses under various disciplines to include gender dimension in academic programmes. These GCs’ principal activities include research, teaching, workshops, training, documentation, and community service. Typically, most of these centres run gender-related academic programmes, especially at postgraduate levels.

The second group are the Policy focused Gender Centres which have similar mandates to the teaching and research-based GCs but perform additional activities geared towards promoting gender equity/equality within the university such as gender mainstreaming activities—gender policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. These Policy GCs are tasked with facilitating gender equity project alongside their original mandate of research, teaching, and community services. They are generally committed to fostering gender equity by designing effective policy instruments that promote gender mainstreaming into university administration, teaching, and research activities. These centres culminate an effort to have concerted and well-synchronised policies and programmes for integrating gender into the university as a whole. As such, university GCs under this category will typically have a centre/unit and a gender policy in place. Currently, only four federal universities in Nigeria fall under this category.

While gender is broadly taken as a development issue in Nigeria, existing studies show that gender indicators are yet to guide governance and university administration (Aina, 2013). With women starting to gain more access to educational opportunities during the democratic era, the presumption that a woman’s position is at home has been changed (Aina et al., 2015, p. 297). However, women are still underrepresented in the academic profession, especially in academic leadership positions, despite a national and institutional gender policy (Eboiyehi et al., 2016; Muoghalu & Eboiyehi, 2018; Ogbogu, 2011). An indicative sample of gender imbalance among academic staff in Nigerian universities is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Gender Distribution of Academic Staff in a Selection of Nigerian Universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>Male %</th>
<th>Female %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Benin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Jos</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Abuja, Gwagalada</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal University, Dutse</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Nigeria, Nsukka</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Uyo</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka</td>
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Aina (2014) argued that the gender gap is most pronounced as women move up the academic cadre. She noted that only 24.7% of the principal officers⁴ are women, and for the other categories, the trend is the same: Governing Council (16.9%), Deans/Directors (18.3%) and Professors (15.6%). Throughout the history of Nigeria, only about 20 female Vice-Chancellors have been recorded, despite the high number of universities (155). Besides, Odejide (2003, p. 457) noted that the few women in academic leadership positions are nominated to these positions, not on a full-time basis but in an acting capacity. Igiebor and Ogbogu's study on the representation of women in selected universities in Southwestern Nigeria reflect those of Odejide (2003). According to the authors, women were highly represented as deputy registrars from among the core administrative management positions and heads of departments from academic positions (Igiebor & Ogbogu, 2016). In addition to numerical representation, male dominance is further recognisable in discourses on women’s underrepresentation in leadership positions. While women continue to enter the academy, universities often remain a male bastion where men’s access to power is maintained and legitimised through processes, rules and discourses that continue to privilege certain ways of operating (Blackmore, 2021; Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

4. Conclusion

This study traced the historical development of women’s underrepresentation in Nigerian universities. It offers a historical perspective on women’s exclusion and underrepresentation in higher education and academic leadership positions in Nigeria. The study also presents an overview of efforts aimed at gender equity in Nigeria, highlighting key developments such as the emergence of feminist research and activism, the creation of regional, national and institutional gender policies and programmes, and gender centres in universities.

References


⁴In Nigeria, the principal officers comprise the visitor (usually the president of the federal republic of Nigeria, the Chancellor, Pro-chancellor and Chairman of Council, the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (academics and administration), Registrar, Bursar and University Librarian.


