

Women still under-represented at the top

Research carried out in January and February 2009 by the Women's Leadership Network¹ shows that of the 361 college principals in the further education sector, only 36 per cent are women.

Some progress has been made since the late 1990s when women comprised 25 per cent of principals in England. The current proportion of 36 per cent falls far short of what we would expect, however, when we consider that women constitute 63 per cent of the FE and skills workforce, that 59 per cent of teachers in FE are women and that 60 per cent of the managers in colleges are women (LLUK figures for 2006/07).

And we know that, in spite of the increases in the number of BME principals, black and minority ethnic women continue to be under-represented at this level.

The statistics reveal some startling differences, both within college types and between the various regions in England. So, to quote the Equalities and Human Rights Commission in *Sex and Power*², it seems that in further education, as elsewhere, "things are changing for women at the top at a snail's pace".

How are we to encourage more women to aim higher in further education?

The annual conference of the Women's Leadership Network will address the main factors as identified through our research:

- the importance of family friendly policies in colleges
- the need to develop skills for leadership
- the establishment of non-discriminatory selection processes
- how to make a successful application
- setting up local support networks and the role of mentoring and coaching.

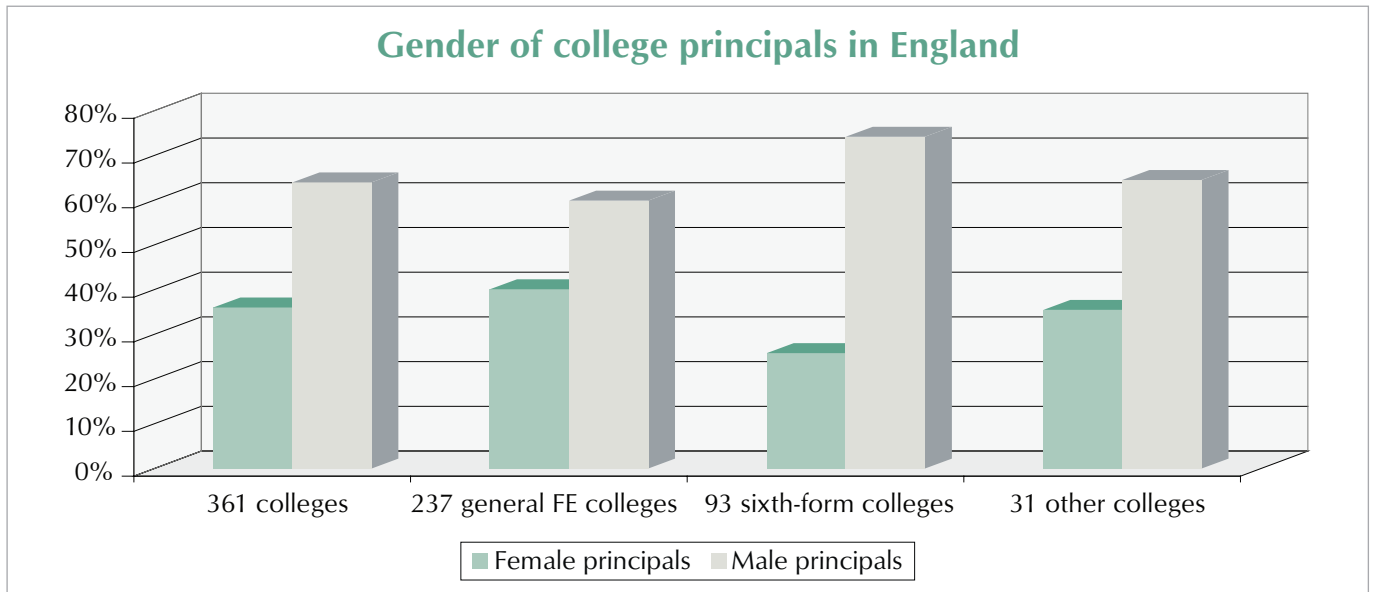
Offering a combination of inspirational speakers and practical workshops, the conference will take place at the Novotel Hotel in Euston Road, London, on Wednesday 10 June 2009 from 10.00 to 17.00. You can register online at www.wlnfe.org.uk or complete and submit an application form.

1 The desk research was undertaken by Thalia Marriott, who retired after nine years as principal of West Thames College and now coordinates the Women's Leadership Network.

2 Equalities and Human Rights Commission, 2008. *Sex and Power*.

Gender of principals by college category

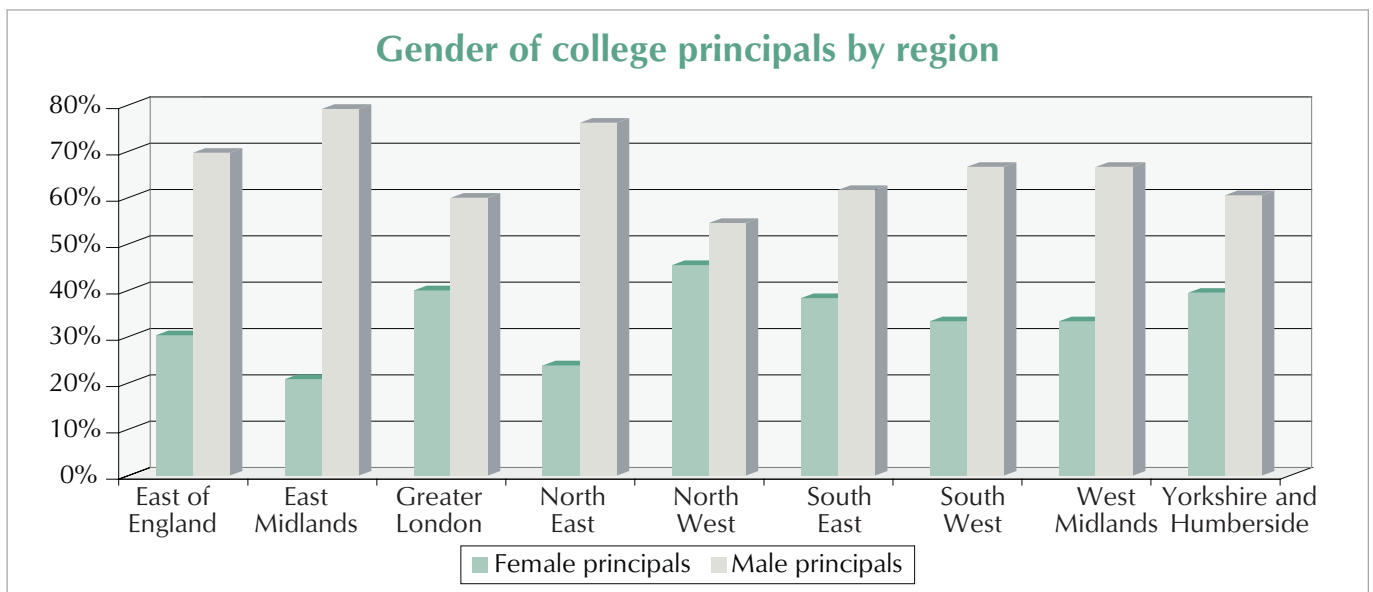
The table below shows the gender of principals by three college types: general colleges of further education, sixth-form-colleges and other colleges (specialist providers and specialist designated colleges).



While the 31 specialist colleges show a percentage of 35 per cent, near the national average of 36 per cent, only 26 per cent of sixth-form colleges are led by female principals. Forty per cent of general FE colleges have female principals, which is an improvement on past years but still well below the percentage of female staff.

Gender of college principals by regions in England

The next table shows some significant differences in the percentages of women principals across the regions in England.

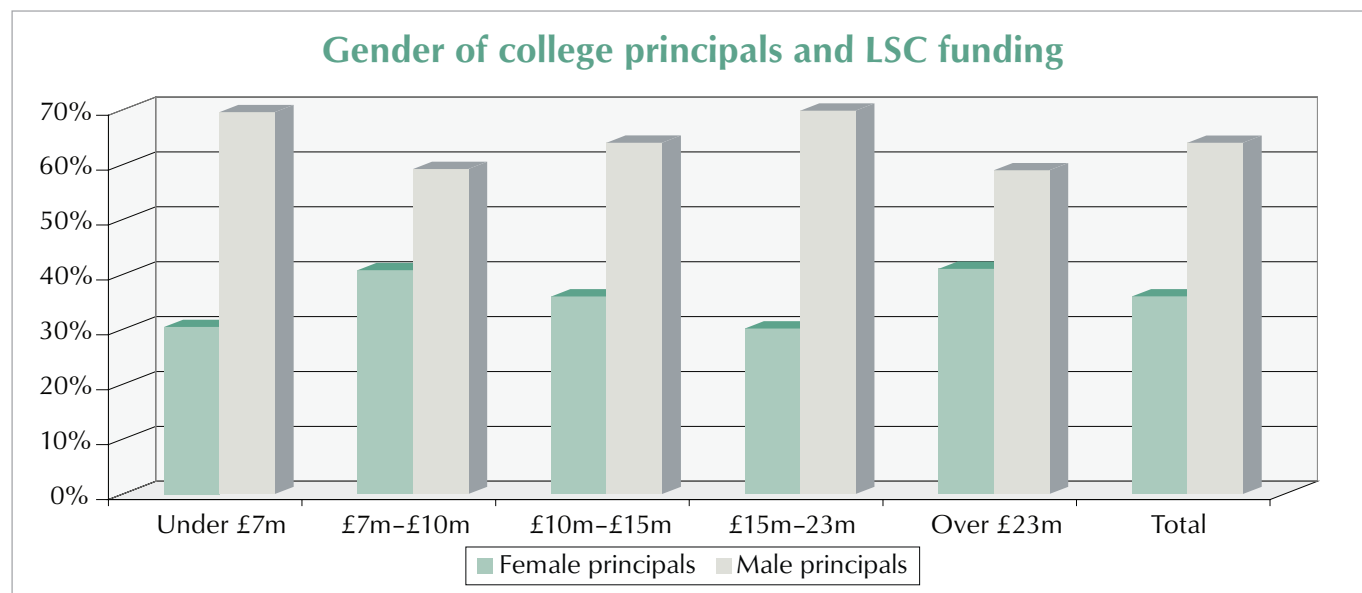


The north-west region, with its 55 colleges, has the highest percentage of women principals, at 45 per cent. This region is followed by Greater London (55 colleges) at 40 per cent and Yorkshire and Humberside (38 colleges) at 39 per cent. These areas show evidence of positive increases in the number of women at the top.

However, when we look at east Midlands, only 21 per cent of the 24 colleges have women principals, and the north-east does not fare much better at 24 per cent of their 21 colleges. Just in front of them sits east of England, where 30 per cent of its 33 colleges led by women.

Gender of principals by volume of LSC income

The following table shows colleges and the amount of income they are contracted to receive from the Learning and Skills Council in 2008/09 (source: LSC document *Allocations by Providers 2005/06 to 2008/09*).



It seems that, although fewer women are appointed to the post of principal, once appointed they are as likely as men to be leading the colleges with the highest income. The table shows that 41 per cent of principals at colleges receiving over £23 million from the LSC are women.

Women are under-represented at the colleges receiving the least amount of LSC income, at only 30 per cent, but in this category there are more sixth-form colleges than general FE colleges, and as can be seen in the first table, women comprise only 26 per cent of sixth-form college principals.

The business case for diversifying leadership in FE

There is plenty of evidence to show that women principals are successful. For example, 50 per cent of the general FE colleges in England judged Outstanding by Ofsted are led by women and 46 per cent of the principals leading the 26 member colleges of the 157 Group are women.

So there's a business case for diversifying leadership in colleges and a clear message here to governing bodies and their chairs: women across the country have an outstanding track record in running successful colleges, carrying out mergers and achieving high grades in inspections.

Further research

The Women's Leadership Network invites suggestions for priorities for further research required in order to clarify the factors and issues involved in encouraging and supporting more women into top jobs. If funds allow we hope to extend the research to the whole of the United Kingdom.