

# **Title: Becoming a female leader in higher education: Investigations from a regional university**

**Key words:** Leadership, Women, Higher Education, Regional University, Gender Equity

## **Abstract**

Issues of gender imbalance in leadership have long been a significant issue in universities, as is the case across most industries. This paper explores the experiences of seven females who have successfully achieved senior leadership positions at a regional university in Australia. While the experiences of these women differ in many ways, there are certainly similarities in the challenges and adversities that they have faced, and their perceptions of what has allowed them to experience success in their leadership roles. This paper provides a number of recommendations for women aspiring to be leaders in higher education, such as committing to ongoing development, taking opportunities when presented, developing resilience, developing a track record and seeking support, and also recommendations for institutions.

## **Introduction**

Barriers to female leadership are often contested in the literature with diverse perceptions, claims and counter claims, including the issues of the ‘glass ceiling’; bias and discrimination; chilly culture; invisibility; opting out; the pipeline effect; stereotyping; corporate culture; networks; personal barriers including work-life balance; confidence and aspiration; mentoring or support; and enabling programs (Bagilhole & White, 2013; Burke, 2006; Burke & Vinnicombe, 2006; Coleman, 2010; Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; Rindfleish, 2000; Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, Ballenger, & Klein, 2007).

A Commonwealth of Learning report indicated that women are making a difference in higher education, they are “introducing new ways of approaching the opportunities and challenges of 21st century higher education” (Latchem, Kanwar, & Ferreira, 2013, p. 157) despite following different paths than men in attaining leadership roles. However, irrespective of industry or country there are still fewer women than men in senior leadership positions (Bradley, 2013; Kreissl, Striedinger, Sauer, Hofbauer, 2015; Morley, 2013). Women may “have cracked the code” (Bradley, 2013, p. 59) to achieving senior leadership roles, but are yet to pass on this code to many of their colleagues.

The current academic and promotion structure in most Australian universities has five levels: associate lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor and professor. There are a number of different approaches to gaining a permanent position, from the use of a three year probation period to the traditional tenure approach. Across the Australian higher education sector, women continue to be underrepresented in senior academic and Vice Chancellor positions. For example, although 44% of Australian academic staff are female, they are only represented in approximately one quarter of senior lecturer and university vice chancellor positions (Lipton, 2015). This demonstrates that gender equity in the tertiary workforce is still a problem.

This study is set in a regional university established in the 1960s in Queensland, Australia that has a slightly higher female representation than the national average with 42% of its academic workforce are women and 30% are in senior leadership positions. The university was established through the tenacity of a local woman who, despite the opposition from the community members, managed to raise sufficient funds to satisfy the Prime Minister’s requirement to

provide additional financial support. Notwithstanding this initial female leadership, the principal director of the institution was male, followed by a succession of male leadership and almost entirely male staff. Over time, a shift has occurred in this male-dominated environment towards a culture with a strong commitment to increasing gender equity. This emphasis on equity is evidenced by a range of support structures and programs such as the Women's Network, a women's mentoring initiative, and other short and long-term professional development opportunities that target female employees. Today, an increasing gender-balance is evident with the two top leadership positions held by females as well as many other leadership positions within the university.

Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink and Haslam (2014) noted that as more females reach the senior leadership positions it is important to “understand their experiences in these roles” (p. 203). This paper explores the experiences of females in senior leadership positions at one regional university in Australia.

## **Scan of the Literature**

In recent decades, leadership opportunities for women in workplaces have expanded, yet there remains a concern that women are still significantly underrepresented in the highest levels of leadership across sectors and industries (Madsen, 2012; McDermott, 2014; Ward & Eddy, 2013). While the number of women in senior positions in higher education is increasing, it is doing so at a glacial rate (Burke & Nelson, 2002; Gallant, 2013). With women having represented the majority of undergraduate students for the past 35 years (Ward & Eddy, 2013), it is reasonable to question why their representation diminishes at each step of the academic leadership ladder.

Higher education is undergoing unprecedented change (O'Connor, 2015) and the “educational restructure presents new demands and challenges on managers in higher education” (Peterson, 2014, p. 35). During this critical period of reorganisation and transformation of Universities, the expertise and capabilities of all those in leadership should be fully utilised, both male and female. The implementation of formalised leadership development programs, particularly those targeting women, have endeavoured to assist in this drive for a broader leadership base as well as combat gender inequalities in the workplace.

### **Pipeline pathways**

Advancement through the pipeline in academic leadership has been based on a tradition where those who have longer tenure at an organisation are more qualified to lead that organisation. This assumes that “time will take care of the problem, and that if women do not advance it is because they are unwilling or unable to do so” (Ragins et al., 1998, p. 36). However, women have traditionally received less preparation for such advancement and have been described as having less human capital than men (Probert, 2005). This traditional approach tends to eliminate many women from the pool of candidates for leadership positions, particularly those in the pipeline towards senior leadership (Wallace & Marchant, 2009). In a comparison of life and career trajectories of male and female leaders in large organisations, Fitzsimmons, Callan and Paulsen (2014) found that there is a clear difference in the timing and career structure of females and males particularly in the “development of leadership capital” (p. 258).

Staying within the pipeline is a choice that some female academics make. Opting “to forgo promotion and leadership positions in anticipation of messy politics, sexist cultures, or irreconcilable challenges between work life and family life” (Ward & Eddy, 2013, p. 29). These

women tend to “hit the ceiling in the middle grade positions” (Black & Islam, 2014, p. 15) and stay in them for the remainder of their careers rather than move to senior leadership positions. Johnson and Mathur-Helm (2011) suggested that the invisible ceiling still exists although it is now more subtle. Somewhere along the line, the pipeline into senior academic leadership changes for women in a way that it does not for men. Jones (2014) explained that the pipelines to institutional leadership are not always clear, or available, for women. For those women who have been able to navigate through it their journey has been slow, and many women who are interested in serving in senior leadership roles “remain caught in the middle or in the “belly of the pipeline”” (McDermott, 2014, p. 29). The literature describes this interruption within career progression as a leak or a clog in the pipeline (Jones, 2014; Madsen, 2012; Peterson, 2014). It has been suggested that the pipeline will have less of an impact “once generations of appropriately qualified women move through the organisational hierarchies” (Morley, 2013, p. 122).

### **Work and Life Balance**

There is a broad range of literature about the balance of work and private lives on women, particularly the impact of family-life demands (Elmuti, Jia, & Davis, 2009; Chesterman, Ross-Smith, & Peters, 2003; Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011; Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Marongiu and Ekehammar (1999) discuss the ‘double track’ which they defined as “combining home and work roles continuously” (p. 430). The increased time commitment and work pressure that a leadership promotion entails often affect a woman’s career choices in a way that is not usually experienced by men. Not only do women face this choice, but if they take time out of their careers then the decision of when and how to re-enter the workforce forms another obstacle (Adapa, Rindfleish, & Sheridan, 2015). However, there is some evidence to suggest that women

are gaining more understanding of how to balance life and work, so it is “easier for them to climb to the top while still raising a family” (Elmuti et al., 2009, p. 181).

Sandberg (2014) suggested that women fail to ‘lean in’ to opportunities to advance themselves professionally, most often due to concerns about how their professional positions may affect their personal life choices. Ward & Eddy (2013) reiterate this position, suggesting that

women actually lean back from the ladder of academic progress, promotion, and leadership because of a perception that advanced positions in academe are not open to women, particularly women who hope to make time for a family or life beyond work. (p. 2)

Positions of senior leadership are cited in the literature as coming at a high personal cost, with models and norms of a balanced lifestyle and successful work-life integration, often being few and far between (Ward & Eddy, 2013). Increasing the number of women in leadership positions involves more than looking at individual women, but also requires institutions to create supportive and healthy work environments that encourage women to integrate family life and personal goals with their career aspirations for leadership and advancement, and that foster a desire for women to ‘lean in’ (Ward & Eddy, 2013).

### **Supportive colleague or competitor?**

A lack of female role models in leadership positions adds to confusion in how to act or behave as a female leader (Elmuti et al., 2009; Liu, 2014). Some research suggests that even when female role models do exist, a culture of supporting each other in these roles is lacking (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011; McReynolds Palmer, 2014; Rindfleish, 2000). Multiple complexities have been described in regard to such role models for aspiring women. For example, emerging leaders

regularly report having had negative experiences with female co-workers and supervisors within the workplace. In addition, senior women who have not had support from their female colleagues, were frequently unaware of how best to support other women aspiring to assume leadership positions and often consider aspiring leaders as a threat to their own advancement.

Black and Islam (2014) have suggested that “[w]omen need to learn to be kinder to other women” (p. 11). Similarly, Rindfleish (2000) revealed that “not all senior management women will support other women in the workplace” (p. 172). Due to the limited number of females in senior positions there is sometimes a perception that females have had to knock others over on their way to the top promoting a lack of trust, and a dog-eat-dog approach. Women have often complained about how they are treated by men, but perhaps how they treat each other is not much better. Black and Islam (2014) remind leaders to look to other senior leaders, irrespective of gender, to support, “and champion other women. We can look to influential men to help us progress and develop but we need to turn to each other too” (p. 13).

Membership in networks is another way that women (and men) can support the career and leadership success of other women (Coleman, 2011). Networks can come in a range of forms including: Social networks, mixed gender networks, female only networks, informal and formal networks, discipline specific networks or those created for females in a geographical area, networks that have a range of seniority levels or those networks where the participants are at similar levels. Benefits gained from membership in networks include the ability to build social capital, promote new contacts, professional socialization and emotional support. Shakeshaft et al., (2007) however, have noted that “women still need assistance in establishing and effectively using networks” (p. 113). Networking is an important activity for female leaders at all levels (Coleman, 2011; Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

## **Enabling programs**

Formal and informal leadership development within any organisation is arguably the most effective way to enhance leadership capacity within any workplace. Madsen (2012) reported that

[l]eadership development programs for women continue to be a critical element in teaching and supporting women in higher education to prepare for, attain, and maintain positions of influence within their institutions. The bottom line is that we need to help prepare (e.g. increase aspirations, develop skills and competencies, obtain mentors and coaches) more women for leadership in higher education. (p. 5)

Enabling structures might include career development support; coaching; training; advice and sponsorship; professional development; organisational change such as equity policies; advocacy; and mentorships (Morley, 2014). Organisational leadership development programs build the capacity and capabilities of groups of people to gain leadership skills and problem solve (Day, 2000). While such programs or structures enhance the leadership development of both genders, many organisations specifically promote female leadership programs.

Perhaps the most common application of support for women leaders has been seen in mentoring programs. Many women report that support through either informal or formal mentoring relationships has been beneficial, and that in many cases can be as beneficial for the mentors as they are for the mentees (Shakeshaft et al., 2007; Wyn, Acker, & Richards, 2000). Encouraging current leaders, male and female, to serve as mentors promoting the accomplishment of women and providing guidance and tips for career advancement are noted as a key to successful support of women in leadership (Shakeshaft et al., 2007; Ward & Eddy, 2013).



Universities, like all other education systems, have the opportunity to make a significant difference to the effectiveness of women leaders through the development of resources and programs that directly support current leaders and those aspiring to take on a leadership role. This study describes the characteristics and experiences of seven female senior leaders in higher education.

## **Method**

The research site was selected to provide a regional university perspective on the issue of women in leadership in higher education. Purposive sampling (Berg, 2001) was used to explicitly target key senior women to discover the nature of female leadership roles in a rural university context. Twenty women were identified as currently or previously holding senior leadership positions within the university. Seven women agreed to be interviewed by a research assistant. These personal accounts revealed their journey to leadership in this rural context, how they see themselves as senior leaders in higher education, and the challenges for them as females in these roles. The authors involved in this paper have been co-facilitators of a project which supported females working or studying in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics disciplines.

A qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2009) was taken for this study based on the research of Madsen (2007) and a constant comparative approach (Wellington, 2000) was used to analyse the data. Data came from reflective interviews of 30 – 60 minutes with women who are current or past senior leaders at the university. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed in full and initially analysed by one author to categorize responses. Transcriptions and analyses were reread by a second author to confirm the categories and reduce categories into themes and confirm saturation. From this point, the author summarised each woman's story. The summaries

were read by two other authors extracting and comparing categories and themes from the first author, with minor adjustments made to create the final themes and stories. The accuracy of the interpretations of the data from the interviews was reviewed by the interviewees through a member checking process (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

This study aimed to explore two key questions in relation to women in leadership:

- What are the common experiences and characteristics of the women in leadership positions in a regional university?
- What recommendations would senior leaders have for aspiring and middle level leaders?

## **Findings**

This section will present a short summary of the interview data for each of the seven participants and will then discuss common features of their experiences and the participants' recommendations for aspiring leaders. The following is a short recount of their background and their leadership journey.

### **Frances**

Frances attended a single-sex academic high school where the headmistress was "*an early feminist of sorts*" who encouraged her students to enroll in university. Frances was the first in her family to go to university. Her mother did not have the skills to help her daughter, suggesting that "*uni is a waste of time for a girl*", but also thinking that her daughter "*may meet a nice doctor there.*" Frances had to make her own decisions about education. Her early approach to life was influenced by spending school holidays overseas with well-educated host parents, who introduced her to travel and a more sophisticated lifestyle than she had known in her rural

background. University in the 1960s was an “*inspiring place to be*”. After completing a bachelor’s degree she was offered a Masters, but instead became a lecturer as soon as she graduated, working in teacher training colleges and TAFE. She then worked in one university for many years, but it took 20 years to move to senior lecturer position. She admitted she was ambitious for an interesting life but “*didn’t know how to be ambitious*” in career terms. Eventually, she realised she needed a PhD to get a promotion, and she started to win university teaching awards, which meant that subsequent promotion to Associate Professor was relatively quick. She moved to two other universities to secure senior leadership positions and professorial roles.

### **Jennifer**

Jennifer was born before World War II in a regional farming area and her parents had a small business. She went to boarding school and had demonstrated leadership traits from school age. She owned a small regional business, and at one stage worked near the Snowy Mountains, taking over as a manager in a heavily male-based mining area. She was the driving force behind establishing the university, and had the support of her aunt and father, who appeared to be especially supportive regarding her education. To the contrary, her mother’s advice was to “*get this silly nonsense out of your head*”.

### **Alison**

Alison’s parents had no academic qualifications and finished school at 14 years of age. However, they were very supportive of their children getting an education and wanted them to strive to be better than their parents. Alison has two younger brothers, and she was the first in the family to go to university. During her career, she had been in leadership positions at three universities.

From childhood she admits she *“was quite often out front, never afraid to speak out or give my idea and/or opinion. I was quite direct”*. She valued hard work and effort by regularly working a six day week, which had led to her current leadership position. As she reflected, she realised that she spent a lifetime *“crawling up through the layers”*. She also has a good self-awareness stating *“I am a high performer; so if I do something, I do it 150%”*.

### **Alexandra**

While her family valued education and were interested in world affairs, Alexandra was the first in family to go to university. She had a strong work ethic and worked in the family business when growing up, which provided her with customer service skills. Alexandra started her career as a tutor and research assistant. She later worked in a number of Australian universities undertaking various senior leadership positions, and suggested that her career path and choices were more often due to unexpected opportunities than any career planning. In her experience, doing things well and being noticed has led to a number of opportunities. She found that in some of her previous contexts it was *“very hard for a female to go any further”*, which motivated her to relocate. Alexandra draws a clear distinction between leadership and management suggesting *“I am in a senior management position in which one would hope to display leadership.”*

Alexandra likes working with people and believes that people can lead from wherever they are in the institutional structure. She also feels strongly that people should not be made to feel inadequate if they cannot get a senior management position. Alexandra believes that her incorruptibility, her diplomacy, and her ability to negotiate have been the skills and attributes that have most helped her to rise through the ranks to senior leadership.

### **Tonya**

A problem solver at an early age, she strove to complete a Bachelor's degree, Honours, and a PhD in her early 20s, leading into teaching, postdoctoral and other academic work overseas. When a position became available in Australia she was told "*those jobs are for young married males, not young married females, don't bother applying*". This had a devastating impact on her career journey, destroying a dream. Subsequent relief teaching at private schools supported the family income. Studies for a Diploma of Education while teaching in schools and at university led to another doctorate in a different field. With the support of her husband and extended family, she was able to persist, and eventually landed the senior leadership positions to which she had aspired.

## **Sandra**

Sandra finished school at 16 without completing high school; however she pursued and completed a vocational qualification. She had no great aspirations at that time, and her parents were initially not supportive of her attending university because she was female. They were proud of her achievements but happy that they did not bear the financial burden of the study throughout her career. Sandra later completed the equivalent of her high school diploma. Her younger brother was the first in family to attend university, with Sandra later following in his footsteps when she was required to complete a Bachelor's degree to maintain her position at work. She went on to complete a Masters qualification while having and raising children. Her career trajectory went from lecturer, head of department, head of school, and continued to senior leadership positions in a range of universities, having completed a doctorate "*in the interim*". Sandra attests to discovering education like others discover religion: "*Once I found it, I wasn't about to let it go!*"

## **Julie**

Julie was the first in her family to attend university and taught in the school system for a number of years. Earlier studies lead into a permanent position at a regional university after multiple contract positions. In a move that Julie described today as “*crazy*”, she resigned her position after two years as a permanent staff member to have children, financially supporting her family through part-time marking and tutoring. She felt that at that point in time it was not possible for her to be a mother and to work, but realised even then the irony of that decision, given that she was working in the area of access and equity. Despite the demands of her young children and aging parents, she completed her PhD as a part-time student, but considered her career path a series of “*misguided career choices*”.

## **Discussion**

This discussion addresses the participants’ experiences grouped into themes that emerged from analysing each of the interview transcripts and combined with the literature highlighted previously. Interestingly, although the participants came from different states in Australia and worked in different countries, there were remarkable similarities in their journeys to becoming senior leaders in higher education. They were from middle class families and were the first generation in their families to attend university. All the participants had partners, and all but one had children, causing them to juggle both family commitments and careers while studying and moving up the academic ladder which is unusual for high achieving women, generally it is around 50% (Hewlett, 2002). Their key discipline, careers and rise to senior leadership positions in a university were varied, however there were some strong common themes in their recommendations for other women coming through the ranks.

## **Family backgrounds**

The majority of participants were from working class backgrounds, being the first or second in their families to study at university. The family expectations about going to university varied. Some participants were not expected to go to university, and little or no familial financial support was provided when they did go on to further their education. Most of the participants' parents valued education and provided moral support, even though the parents themselves did not have a degree. However, many of their families expressed reservations about a female going to university, despite their professed value of such an endeavor in general.

In a study of female academics in the United Kingdom, Hoskins (2013) found that many women "entered a world that was completely alien" (p.70) which paralleled the experiences of the participants in this study. Being the first in the family to attend higher education studies also meant that the participants were not prepared for the foreign experience of the university culture. Tonya commented that her parents were "*always very supportive, but did not pressure*", and Frances noted that her mother was also supportive, but didn't have the skills to assist her due to her own limited experience of formal education. These participants' successes align with Hoskins' (2013) findings that a person can achieve high levels of education and leadership positions despite their families having limited prior knowledge of how to attain such success.

## **Resilience**

Resilience has been observed by Black & Islam (2014) as an essential characteristic and a common attribute of female leaders. Resilience is possibly best exemplified by Jennifer who was instrumental in the creation of the university, when she explained the treatment she received during that experience. She revealed "*they told me to get out of the city and not to be interfering*

*with the town*". Even her mother said *"it would suit you better, Lassie, to look after your business and your children and to get this silly nonsense out of your head"*. Notwithstanding these personal affronts and possible knockbacks, she persevered to gain local financial support and approval leading to eventual support from the Prime Minister to establish the university.

Julie reflected on the resilience she has seen in other women's experiences, which paralleled her own, as they engaged in university employment, raising children, and continuing their studies.

Morley's (2014) research reported that unsuccessful applications for jobs, promotion and awards resulted in a "loss of status and self-esteem", while success resulted in a "loss of independence, research time, health and well-being" (Morley, 2014, p. 119).

Fitzsimmons, Callan and Paulsen (2014) noted that "self-promotion had to be backed by achievement" (p. 257). As Julie noted, despite rejections *"I worked myself up the ranks"* and *"was lucky with promotion until I was rejected for Professor"* and *"the same thing happened with awards at times - I had to put in more than once"*. Julie turned rejection into a driving factor: *"What I learnt from the process of rejection for professorship was that I have to push myself forward, and identify myself as a professor"*.

Resilience is epitomised by participants' successful career progression, despite the varying planned and unplanned blockages. They showed the important "stamina to cope with the stresses of the academy" (Wyn et al., 2000, p. 440) and demonstrated that factors such as rejections, discrimination, poor timing, and other difficulties did not prevent them from achieving the leadership positions they envisioned for themselves.

## **Leadership views**



Leadership views and styles of the participants have been influenced by their varying career and life experiences. For example, the success of executing their career plan, personal expectations together with family commitments, and the high level of stress in academia were all indicated as factors impacting their leadership approach. Their thoughts on leadership often related to valuing relationships and contributing to the growth of others. This emphasis on people is also reflected in the literature as a key element of female leadership (Chesterman et al., 2003; Elmuti et al., 2009; Kloot, 2004).

Sandra expressed the belief that, *“if you value people, then people will value you and the rest looks after itself”*. Similarly, Alison mentioned, *“I like to enable others and grow people.”* These views related to a distributed leadership approach, which was mentioned specifically by two participants, Sandra and Frances, but also implied by other participants in the study. Tonya stated,

*“It is also about involving others in the decision-making process, and making sure that others feel that they can contribute to that decision-making process. Those who work with you should feel that they are empowered by working in that unit. They should not feel disempowered”*.

Frances went further and noted that in *“good managers scaffold a context in which staff can develop their careers.”*

Other issues around leadership that emerged were the notions of self-leadership, trust, nurturing, and listening to others, while also *“deal[ing] with the difficulties”* (Alexandra). For example, Alexandra connected leading people with being able to lead oneself: *“I don’t think you can be an ‘external leader’ if you are not able to lead yourself”*. Similarly, Sandra described her experience

with self-leadership as she recounted, *“Nobody held my hand and I would have been insulted if they tried. I’m a big girl.”* Tonya further acknowledged the importance of self-leadership as it applies to decision-making indicating *“Leadership is about listening and about making decisions and facilitating actions that arise from those decisions”*. The participants indicated that taking the time to consider the perspectives of others when making difficult decisions is a valuable component of self-leadership. It may be quicker and (initially) easier to make a decision without doing so, but a good leader makes the effort to fully explore complex situations, their perceptions, and possible outcomes with those they lead prior to making a decision. This process demonstrated a significant difference between the typical manager and a leader. Alexandra described what she sees as the difference between the concepts of management and leadership in depth, saying:

*“I think a lot of people confuse leadership with management. I don’t think that even being in the most senior management positions makes you a leader .... There are limited senior management positions, but you don’t have to be one of those to necessarily display leadership .... Impact and influence can occur at any level.”*

These participants valued a collaborative leadership style. The collective approach to leadership they undertook through nurturing and listening to others appeared to have worked in their favour when gaining higher leadership positions. However, this may also be a personal value or characteristic which was their preferred way of working.

## **Gender discrimination**

The impact of gender was more predominant in the early life of the participants and it was noted that gender discrimination was exhibited by both males and females. Sandra remembered that, *“as a 16 year old, I suggested I might like to go to university and my parents response was ‘don’t be stupid, you are only a girl’”*. The message Tonya received that the jobs for which she was aspiring were meant for men and not women, was an additional example of how discriminatory comments were received. As society expanded its understanding of gender equality, the expression of these issues changed. As she progressed throughout her career, Tonya indicated that she, *“still encountered discrimination, which was much more subtle once it became inappropriate.”* Today the discrimination tends to be less obvious and may take the form of institutionalized discrimination (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011; Rindfleish, 2000) or personal discrimination and is very difficult to prevent (Burke & Vinnicombe, 2006).

Gender discrimination was felt particularly when seeking higher-level positions or academic promotion. Alison explained, *“I have seen men get promoted and get jobs, and I have thought ‘how the hell did they get that?’ when you look at what I have got”*. For six of the seven women, gender-based discrimination was evident throughout their career. For Alison, subtle discrimination had a devastating impact. She describes, *“I was unsupported and undermined frequently....I felt unappreciated, sidelined, and completely demoralized.”* Julie reported feeling, *“that the odds are stacked up against women”*. Frances further reinforced this idea when she recalled her experiences in academic leadership. She stated, *“It was a boy’s club and there was really no more to it. That boy’s club was truly impenetrable.”* Most of the participants had encountered some discrimination. Alexandra, however, remained fairly quiet on the issue of discrimination, commenting only that middle-management *“was one place where it was very hard for a female to go any further.”* O’Connor (2015) purported that “changing women’s

position in universities requires changes to a gendered culture” (p. 305) in order to reverse the bias against women.

It appears that the concepts of the pipeline pathway described previously were felt by the participants. Glass ceilings were mentioned specifically by three of the women, with one of these saying they had “*no personal experience of a glass ceiling*” (Sandra). It seems that Frances was perceived something more solid than glass ceilings “*I was aware that men were getting into senior positions well ahead of women, but I didn’t so much see glass ceilings, as I saw the brick wall of the boys’ club.*” Interestingly, Ryan and Haslam (2005) suggested that males are likely to achieve leadership by “means of a ‘glass escalator’” (p. 81), providing an easier transition for men into senior leadership positions than women, even though the number of women who have penetrated the ‘glass ceiling’ has increased.

### **Work and Life Balance**

Attempting to achieve balance between one’s professional and personal responsibilities has been a major part of the participants’ lives. It was inherent for participants that family life would fit in with professional life. However, two participants differentiated from the others. One participant, Julie, resigned from professional life to focus on her family, resulting in a gap in the career path. This participant considered her choices to be “*misguided*” and “*crazy*”. That decision had a negative impact on her seniority within the organisation, superannuation benefits, and continuity in her chosen field.

For Tonya, having children led to different career choices. She remarked, “*We had two young children and so I decided to go teaching*”. Her ability to choose a career that she suspected would provide her with the ability to manage her life’s roles seemed to be beneficial to her.

Sandra recognised “*my work life balance has always been appalling and I would never have been able to do it without my very supportive husband. He was the core parent. We made a decision 20 years ago that my career was going to be in pole position*”. Sandra’s family structure confirms Morley’s (2014) finding that there are “challenges of navigating between professional and domestic responsibilities” (p. 124) however Sandra’s family support provided a different resolution to this challenge than was the norm.

A high work ethic and high expectations of themselves (and others around them) was a common theme with all of the participants in this study. Alison elicited that once reaching a senior leadership position research became a “*hobby*” that was completed after work. This strong focus on work led Alison to mention that she, “... *forgot to have children. I was in a career trotting along and didn’t really have the call.*” Similarly, Frances suggests “*[making] your work, work for you*”, and publishing out of the work you do on an everyday basis wherever possible was good advice to aspiring leaders. While majority of the participants decided to simultaneously pursue their careers and raise their families, they did so by working harder and longer hours. Julie and Alison however, decided to focus on one or the other for specific periods of time.

### **Career planning and aspirations**

Participants discussed how or whether they purposefully built a profile over time, including how planned or serendipitous that was, and what sacrifices had to be made along the way. While gender equality was in its early stages during the 1970s when most of these participants were emerging leaders, even a well-planned career was often road-blocked. However, for some, serendipity provided opportunities for flexible solutions when participants experienced rejections or difficulties achieving milestones. Interestingly, most of the participants did not have robust

career goals. In hindsight, Tonya's experiences led her to realise and value the continuity of jobs listed in her CV ensuring success in future job applications. This awareness of the impact of career decisions was confirmed by Julie, saying that she first made "*misguided career choices*", but that "*I think it was my doctorate, teaching awards and my growing confidence that have helped me [to rise to senior leadership positions]*".

What is apparent in Frances' account of her career is that she lacked the cultural capital to know how to be ambitious in this facet of her life. She was ambitious to have an interesting life, which gave rise to engagement with teaching initiatives that led to teaching awards. Frances observed, "*I built the jigsaw pieces, but the big picture was not yet apparent*". She attributed the advent of second-wave feminism for alerting her, and her female counterparts, to the importance of career focus and strategy, leading to a PhD, significant teaching awards, numerous publications and a highly successful academic career.

Wyn et al., (2000) identified that females "must 'manage' their own performance within the culture and the micropolitics of the university" (p. 443). As their careers developed, some of the participants made life-style decisions. Julie realised that "*I have made decisions that were unwise in terms of my career*". She had resigned to have children and found it difficult to return to full time employment at the same level. This was also confirmed by Tonya who remarked, "*The challenge for me then was to make sure my CV did not have huge gaps [due to parenting responsibilities].*"

Black and Islam (2014) observed that putting oneself forward for promotion, awards, and other forms of recognition is essential. Julie, Frances, and others affirmed that winning awards had been very useful. Other forms of deliberate planning were noted in the interviews. Alexandra

took up unexpected opportunities and utilised them to their full advantage. *“It’s about doing interesting things and doing them well, and getting noticed”*. While this indicated again that serendipity has its place to redirect a career and open new challenges that can still be fulfilling planned career expectations, there is a need to actively seek opportunities otherwise *“you become part of the furniture. Sometimes the furniture has to get up and move”* (Alexandra).

Many of the participants were navigating unfamiliar territory as the first in their family to attend university and continued through unfamiliar terrain as they moved into senior leadership positions. Overall, the women demonstrated significant resilience - they were driven, discovering and taking opportunities, maneuvering around gender issue obstacles, taking risks, pausing their career for the sake of family, or sacrificing family for the sake of career.

Although the participants had aspirations for higher positions in the future, formal planning to gain them was not a key element of their success. Sandra had a similar view to Alison who observed, *“I almost ended up where I am by accident”*. Alexandra confessed, *“I’m very bad at career planning. Career planning seems to have happened **to** me”*. This does not mean they did not aspire to higher levels, but they did not see a clear path for proceeding toward that goal, perhaps due to the lack of female role models throughout their careers.

Aspirations can be observed as a driving factor in participants’ success in their career. Bain and Company (2013) claimed that “women aspire to become senior business leaders at almost the same rate as men” (p. 3) and this is supported by an earlier study by Shakeshaft et al. (2007).

While the participants in this study have shown the initiative to achieve the senior positions they were seeking, their approaches were very different. Tonya confessed, *“I did have aspirations as*

*an academic*” however *“I am not outspoken”* and *“it took a long time for me to bounce back after the initial rejection”*. This was reflected in her willingness to move across the country and internationally in pursuit of promotion and unique leadership opportunities.

Frances further elaborated on career goals and ambition. *“I didn’t sit down at 18 and say ‘one day I am going to be [in a senior leadership position]’. I wouldn’t have even thought it was possible for someone like me to work in a university.”* Frances referred to the work of Smith (1987) who suggests that most people have ‘drifted’ into the roles they are doing. Frances feels strongly about the importance of doing well in the present rather than being goal-orientated, reflecting on her progression to the ranks senior leadership by building a *“good track record”* and *“In the immediate moment, I tried to do what I was doing well.”*

Sandra had a strong drive and acknowledged, *“I wanted and I needed to affect change”*. Julie saw clearly that *“there is not just one way to the top. I’ve seen a whole bunch of people do different things”*. Marongiu and Ekehammar (1999) elicited that *“there were no significant gender differences in managerial aspirations, nor did high work/family pressure preclude women’s participation in the managerial aspiration group”* (p. 430).

The experiences of these women may well be a result of the educational and social environment of the times. In 2003, the Information and Research Services in Australia noted that female high school students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (41%) considered cost of university education as unachievable compared to male high school students (34%). There was much less difference between the genders from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This economic difference is explained by Grogan (2010) who noted that woman are more financially



independent than in previous generations. Another change has been the introduction of quotas for a minimum number of females in leadership in some industries. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) identified that having quotas for a minimum number of females in leadership positions may have unexpected results. Norway's introduction of quotas in 2003 increased employment of women to 40%. However, it did not impact the women in higher level positions, with the percentage remaining unchanged for women senior executive (12%), women chairs (2%), and women CEOs (5%) until 2010. The Australian Government (2015) report on Gender Pay Gap Statistics identified a gender pay gap of 16.5%. It was identified that within this 20 year period the gender gap pay was at the lowest in November 2014 with 14.9%. It was acknowledged that there was a change in government policies, but no causal link was identified to explain this reduction.

This section has discussed common themes from the narratives in which participants communicated their experiences about their journeys as senior leaders. In answering the first research question, this study found that the female senior leaders had a number of common experiences and characteristics. First, the women shared common family backgrounds and views on leadership. In addition, the women demonstrated characteristics of resilience, aspiration, and a strong work ethic. For each of the women, these characteristics were essential to their career, as they expressed minimal career planning and faced a range of gender-related and life balance tensions as they navigated the path to senior leadership positions. The next section will respond to the second research question and provide some recommendations for new and aspiring leaders in higher education.

## **Recommendations**

Examining the experiences of participants in this study has resulted in a number of recommendations for early and mid-career women in academia aspiring to formal leadership positions.

The first recommendation speaks to the importance of personal ownership of one's career progression. The senior leaders in this study recommended that all women be proactive within their current position, aim for a future position, and commit to ongoing self-development. When reflecting upon their own careers, all the participants described their journey into senior leadership as somewhat serendipitous. They described a lack of career planning, which resulted in some unanticipated challenges. Ultimately, Alexandra advised emerging leaders to pursue areas that they find stimulating and worthwhile. She said, *"It's about doing interesting things, doing well, and getting noticed. You need to be clear about where you are giving up, how much you are willing to compromise to get where you want to go, how high you want to go"*.

The second recommendation relates to planning for the future. The senior leaders described the importance of seek and embracing growth opportunities. However, even unplanned opportunities can be valuable. As Tonya explained, *"for me it has been about following opportunities, rather than seeking them.... I grabbed opportunities ... some opportunities came up out of the blue"*. It is important to use each opportunity wisely and to view each opening as a prospect for ongoing improvement and advancement.

The third recommendation pertains to resilience. Participants talked about the significant role resilience played in their career success. Embracing opportunities and risking failures are part of the process of seeking formal leadership positions. As women move up the leadership ladder, they are advised to *"self-protect"* and *"maintain dignity"* (Alison). Perseverance to overcome

adversity is critical for one's career advancement. Perhaps Jennifer's advice exemplified this idea best of all when she said simply, "*don't give up*".

The fourth recommendation relates to a focus on recognizable outcomes. All of the senior leaders discussed the importance of developing an established track record and profile. One's profile should be established using the lens of her desired future position. To combat the negative stereotypes of and subtle discrimination towards women leaders, it is imperative that women have demonstrable outcomes from their efforts. The established track record serves as evidence of one's capacity and ability. Participants advised aspiring leaders to accept leadership roles within their current positions to strengthen their track record and profile. Alexandra recognised that sometimes, "*people can feel inadequate if they don't break through the glass ceiling*", but expressed the view that people can be a leader at any level in the organisation. It is not necessary to be in a formal leadership position to make a difference, Chaturvedi, Zyphur, Arvey, Avolio and Larsson (2012) support this concept suggesting that emergent leaders are those who include others although they have no formal authority.

The fifth recommendation is directed to women at all levels (including those in senior leadership positions). Women should actively seek and establish personal support mechanisms such as mentoring, coaching or joining networks. "*You need support, encouragement and time,*" proffered Tonya. None of the senior leaders mentioned they had strong female role models or mentoring, perhaps because there were no senior females in positions to do the mentoring. However, Alison recognised that "*the most powerful thing for me all along has been having a coach for my personal development*". The senior leaders did advocate that aspiring leaders and current leaders at all levels should participate in formal support structures such as mentoring, leadership programs, and conferences. They also made mention of participation in multiple roles,

for example as a participant, facilitator, mentee/mentor, coach, or critical friend within their support network. Perhaps the true message to those already in leadership positions is to ‘pay it forward’.

A final recommendation mirrors the five previous recommendations; however it is directed toward institutions, rather than individual leaders. To support emerging female leaders in higher education, institutions have a responsibility to provide support structures designed to overcome the embedded barriers that still exist in the sector. Institutions should involve both men and women in the efforts to combat gender inequalities that negatively impact society. To this end, decision makers in tertiary education should intentionally:

- nurture potential female leaders;
- direct opportunities to them;
- provide pathways;
- create formal support structures, such as leadership programs and formal mentoring programs; and
- encourage and enable women to utilize these structures.

It is important to recognise that institutional processes, as well as timing, individual work context, family context and opportunity impact on females’ desire and ability to take advantage of prospects for advancement. Their success or otherwise is not necessarily related to the persons’ ability or character. As Frances revealed

*“I have done all the things that the feminist movement would advise, but I have still felt marginalized, overridden, and not heard. So who am I to give advice? The*

*problem with giving advice [to aspiring women leaders] is that it attributes success, or lack of success, just to the woman.”*

In addition to the recommendations above, a number of characteristics or personal qualities were evident in these senior leaders. They had strong characters and described themselves as confident people who liked working with others. They were also very educated individuals, as demonstrated by their achievement of multiple higher degree qualifications. The females in this study were tenacious in their approach to work, and resilient in the face of disappointing outcomes and substandard behaviors of others. They had values such as generosity, equity, and an ability to empower others in addition to a very strong work ethic. These qualities are important to recognise in oneself and in others because as Alison observed, “*leadership comes out of people recognising certain attributes in you*”.

The authors acknowledge that this small scale study has limitations. The small sample size and regional location mean that the results may be not be generalisable to other universities.

However, the discoveries do parallel those found in previous studies and demonstrate that the experience of women seem to be universal, even when isolating specific subgroups.

The findings in this project indicate that future studies are warranted to better understand the personal and professional value of institutional support mechanisms for aspiring female leaders, particularly those located in regional contexts. While the women interviewed in this study unanimously indicated the importance of support, the ways in which they received such support varied, and no clear consensus was made on the specific actions that were most beneficial.

Identifying the key factors contributing to successful support of aspiring female leaders is critical in the development and implementation of both formal and informal institutional structures

promoting gender balance in leadership. Furthermore, such information has significant policy implications that extend beyond the tertiary sector and could have influence on national and international programming efforts promoting gender equity in the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

During the 1950s and 1960s Friedan (1963) coined the term ‘the problem that has no name’ labelling the dissatisfaction that many women felt in the ‘role’ as a wife, mother and homemaker. The contemporary version of ‘the problem that has no name’ relates to the frustration women now feel on the journey to gaining high level leadership positions. The participants have indicated that the barriers which existed in the literature up to forty years ago remain for women today as they move through the senior leadership ranks. As Bradley (2013) observed, for “a feminist who has had a long career in higher education, women’s rise to leadership positions has been agonizingly slow” (p. 59), and there is still a serious gender imbalance among senior leaders in higher education. Consideration should be given to organisational gendered culture in higher education (O’Connor, 2015) and at a much broader social level or as Morley (2013) stated “we need new rules for a very different game” (p. 126).

This paper explored personal accounts of the participants’ journeys in higher education prior to their current or past positions in senior leadership which directly impact management and governance of the university. The narratives of these women, who have worked in multiple locations, reveal both positive and negative experiences along with times of optimism and disappointment. While there were contradictions apparent in the stories of these female senior leaders, they have all approached their diverse roles by trying to make a difference. These are

tales of exclusion and inclusion in an environment where they have few, if any, female predecessors in senior leadership positions.

These women have shared their stories in an environment of widespread and constant change in the sector and we thank them for their candid comments and the time spent from their busy lives to agree to be part of this project. For young women joining the sector or those in their mid-academic career, it is hoped that these narratives and the resulting implications will assist career progression at a more natural pace and with less disappointment than those who have gone before them.

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