

Mentoring – a catalyst for academic success



Associate Professor Ambika Zutshi from Deakin University, Australia, is passionate about helping the next generation of female academics overcome the barriers that can prevent them from building solid research careers. Here, she discusses the importance of mentoring, as well as her latest research into the links between gender and academic collaboration success

Could you begin by telling us a little about yourself and your role as Higher Degree by Research (HDR) Director in the Department of Management at Deakin University, Australia?

In addition to leading HDR activity at the Deakin Business School (Department of Management), my academic career has centred on undertaking high impact research in the areas of corporate social responsibility, business ethics, supply chain management, and higher education space. I have over 80 publications in peer-reviewed journals and books. A number of these outcomes involve international collaborators representing the US, Europe, South East Asia, including Australia, and India. The partnerships involve academics, as well as professional colleagues and industry representatives. I have also secured nearly AUD\$200k in competitive research grants.

Since joining Deakin, I have focused on the teaching-research nexus. I was fortunate to have an opportunity to be Acting Head of the Department (Research) for six months. Following the restructure of the Faculty about five years ago, I was honoured to be appointed as the HDR Director for the Department of Management. In this continuing role, my main responsibility is to support HDR students and work closely with the Head of the Department and Faculty HDR Director. In this role, I am intricately involved at each step of the HDR student experience – from preselection to completion stages.

You are keen to support women in academia and have dedicated recent research efforts to this topic. What led you to this area of work?

In Australia, I have had the honour to interact with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, nationally and globally. The enriched experiences as an academic surrounded by and contributing to diversity in all three dimensions of teaching, research and leadership in administrative roles initiated my interest in this area.

Could you tell us about your research project looking at the links between gender and academic collaboration success?

It should be noted that gender is only one dimension of the collaboration project. I am also working on research highlighting that females face more challenges when collaborating on journal papers or grant applications. This project started following my own experiences of collaborating with colleagues when writing journal papers, and the early findings were published in *European Business Review* in 2012 [Zutshi, A., McDonald, G. and Kalejs, L. 2012, 'Challenges in collaborative writing: addressing authorship attribution', *European Business Review*, 24(1): 28-46].

Are there any other ways you are supporting female academics? How are they benefiting from these activities?

Having honest conversations and sharing my experiences and lessons learnt are part of my humble efforts to support academics, including mentoring female academics. Learning from my experiences, including managing mistakes and challenges in career progression, have assisted in my conversations with the next generation of academics, hopefully helping them to avoid the same errors and successfully play the game.

What role does mentoring play in helping women in academia achieve their career ambitions?

Mentoring is an intricate and irreplaceable part of supporting women in academia. From my perspective and experiences, mentoring to provide direction and achieve career goals, is required for everyone, irrespective of their gender or sexual orientation, or even career stage. One also needs to acknowledge the differences between formal and informal mentoring. Both types of mentoring are significant as they need to work complementarily. Formal mentoring programmes and training can provide a starting point for people with no prior mentoring experience, and also act a networking conduit. There are numerous examples of women who have been able to break through the glass ceiling with helpful senior male mentors – some formally established, and others with informal conversations. Again, there is no one best way, and the type and nature of mentoring will also vary as the career goals and stages change.

“Mentoring is an intricate and irreplaceable part of supporting women in academia”

How difficult is it for female academics to find a mentor and how can these challenges be solved?

The challenges vary on a case-by-case basis and can compound for females from minority and indigenous backgrounds, and those whose English is not their first language. Having conversations with females, and understanding their individual backgrounds, journey to date, aspirations, strengths and opportunities to grow, is required before they are aligned with mentors. A combination of one-on-one and group mentoring is another good option.

Have you faced any barriers in mentoring female academics, and if so, how have they been overcome?

Personally, I have been fortunate to meet wonderful females during my academic journey, both via formal and informal mentoring. This has allowed me to learn from the mentors, and then, as required, share the combined observations and experiences with other females during different stages of my career.

Research shows that less women reach senior roles in academia despite making up 45% of the workforce – why do you think this is the case?

Women do comprise a bigger proportion of the workforce in the higher education sector. However, this is not translated into senior levels (for example Associate Professor, and full Professor) and other leadership roles. One of the reasons, from my perspective, is the misperception that women will not be able to make the commitment and take assertive decisions, and that their leadership style may be too nurturing. On the contrary, the relationship-orientation is a strength that allows individuals to consider competing commitments of different stakeholders.

Do women in your region face any specific challenges with career progression? What are they and how can they be addressed?

There is evidence that females generally are not provided with the same equitable mentoring and networking prospects as their male counterparts. This challenge needs to be addressed by recognising that all of us are individuals, with different learning styles, backgrounds and personal commitments. Recognising the diverse strengths and how they can complement one another will be the starting point. A number of universities and other institutions have been making great strides, including Deakin University, and are subsequently being recognised by the wider community. The Deakin examples include being recipient of the prestigious Athena SWAN Institutional Bronze Award for its programmes that encourage more women to study, research and work in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM). Deakin has also received the 'Employer of Choice for Gender Equality' citation for 11 consecutive years. Last but not least, Deakin was awarded the Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI) Gold Medal for the comprehensive work undertaken in 2018 to increase the inclusion and support of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer/Questioning staff (LGBTIQ+).

"There is evidence that females generally are not provided with the same equitable mentoring and networking prospects as their male counterparts"

How should publishers support the progression of female scholars?

Providing equal opportunities for all submitted research papers, and evaluating them on merit, irrespective of the author's gender, diverse background, or experience is required by publishers. To date, I have not come across any female who likes to be treated differently in academia (or any other sector) because of her gender. Females, request equality, respect and impartiality in interactions with their colleagues and associated higher education institutions, which includes publishers.

What advice would you give to someone starting a career in academia?

Establishing a track record of publications from internationally recognised, and peer-reviewed sources, is imperative and a pre-requisite to enter into academia today. The first step in this process is sharing and receiving constructive feedback on earlier drafts of the work from both faculty (in addition to the supervisory panel) and conferences before it is submitted for journal publication. Having a portfolio of publications is essential for early career researchers to succeed in academia. If there is an opportunity to work, in any capacity, with experienced researchers, this can also act as a great learning experience. Competition is fierce, but taking care of one's health and wellbeing is a non-negotiable requirement.

Profile

Associate Professor Ambika Zutshi holds a Bachelor of Environmental Sciences, Master of Environmental Management and PhD (Monash University, Australia). She is also on a number of editorial boards, including European Business Review Associate Editor, Australasia, UK, International Journal of E-Entrepreneurship & Innovation (Editorial board member), and PSU Research.