

# WOMEN LEADING IN ACADEMIA: VOICES FROM WITHIN THE IVORY TOWER

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a widely known fact that the progression of women into positions of leadership, generally, has been slow. In particular, women find it more difficult to rise to positions of leadership in environments that are highly male dominated, irrespective of the sector of employment (Piterman, 2008). In academia, the proportion of female academic staff in Australian universities is less than 50%, and only 30% of professors (Level E) and associate professors (Level D) are women (Universities Australia, 2017). At the University of Melbourne, for instance, men consistently outnumber women at senior levels, with a sharp drop in the proportion of women academics at Level C and above (University of Melbourne, 2020). This is also true internationally, such as in the United Kingdom where male professors outnumber female professors

three to one (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2020). These numbers are not changing, despite the strong representation of women as undergraduates, postgraduates, and early career academics across all disciplines. After years of institutional and individual efforts to right the wrong, women in academia are still failing to break the glass ceiling.

Effective leadership should be gender neutral, but it is not. Men tend to take a more direct and intentional approach, while women navigate the leadership journey in subtle but perhaps more transformational ways. Women tend to face challenges different from men – and navigate these barriers in very different ways too. The path to leadership is gendered, and as a result, good talent does fall through the cracks. With the higher education landscape in a state of flux, good talent is crucial to provide not only good leadership but also innovative *approaches* to good leadership that provide a positive influence for institutional success.

## EMPOWERING WOMEN TO LEAD IN ACADEMIA

Providing women with the skills to navigate the gendered path is key to promoting gender equality and diversity in the upper echelons of academia. Universities are tackling these and similar objectives in different ways and with differing levels of enthusiasm, using techniques such as training programs, childcare centers to help reconcile women's careers with family responsibilities, higher degree scholarships, and sexual harassment policies (Milligan & Genoni, 1993). Many universities, however, have not had a holistic view and sense of responsibility to develop university leaders, let alone female university leaders. At a national level, this is even much less prominent. Below are some examples of initiatives that aim to empower women to lead in academia.

Athena SWAN is a charter established and managed by the UK Equality Challenge Unit in 2005, which recognizes and celebrates good practices in higher education and research institutions toward the advancement of gender equality: representation, progression, and success for all. Some best practice examples include the following (Advance Higher Education, 2020):

- Development of a new policy that implemented the rotation of senior administrative roles every five years. This was particularly targeted at junior members of staff in order to increase their chances of promotion by developing their professional, organizational, and managerial activity skill sets needed to meet the school's criteria.
- A pilot mentoring scheme was initiated for female academics aimed to “matchup” women to facilitate “free and frank” interactions among colleagues. An evaluation of this mentoring scheme was conducted through review meetings with both mentors and mentees and a questionnaire, with an external report written up and distributed to relevant staff.
- Increasing the number of staff moving from fixed-term to open-ended or permanent contracts and ensuring that there was no significant gender disparity on either contracts. Practical measures were taken to review contract types by gender and length of service, with a clear commitment to improving job security and its staff's work–life balance.

The Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) initiative is a partnership between the Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering. Its vision is to improve gender equity in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) disciplines

in the Australian higher education and research sector by building a sustainable and adaptable Athena SWAN model for Australia. In Australia, 45 higher education and research institutions have completed the SAGE pathway to accreditation, with the majority 39 institutions being awarded the Athena SWAN Institutional Bronze Award (SAGE, 2020). The award recognizes an institution's commitment to advancing the careers of women, transgender, and gender-diverse individuals by providing a four-year action plan to address gender inequity in these disciplines.

The New Zealand Universities Women in Leadership Programme (NZUWiL) was developed to support, encourage, and contribute to the development of women who are, or aspire in the future to be, leaders within the university sector. The goal of this nationwide program is to increase women's leadership capabilities and influence by enhancing their personal, professional, and national-level skills and networks. Much of the success of the NZUWiL is due to the post-program initiatives, involving two five-day intensive, interactive residential programs, designed to stimulate, engage, and boost the skills, leadership capacity, and capability of women who attend, and a one-day regional roadshow held biannually (Universities New Zealand, 2019). Harris and Leberman (2012) noted five factors for the success of the NZUWiL program, including

*start with the top, link leadership development directly to the business, build an integrated leadership strategy, drive consistency in the executive of leadership programs, and hold leaders and the organization accountable.*

(p. 40)

Building on the success of the NZUWiL program, WATTLE (Women ATTaining LEadership) Program is a

residential program aimed at empowering women to attain senior university leadership roles in Australia. It is owned entirely by eight participating Australian universities, with all surplus funds reinvested into the program. Among its goals are to increase the pool of women in senior academic and managerial positions in the tertiary sector; strengthen and augment the pipeline of women for leadership; and address, in a cost-effective manner, the lack of women in leadership and at the same time the gender imbalance in senior academic and managerial positions at a time of public interest and of tertiary sector reform (WATTLE, 2020).

The Australian Higher Education Women's Leadership Summit provides a national platform for women at all levels across the higher education sector to connect, share ideas, and enhance their leadership skills. It is an initiative of the Women & Leadership Australia who collaborate with more than 500 hundred Australian industry associations and professional bodies to create deeper awareness and action around gender and leadership. The annual forum connects and develops Australia's academic female leaders to create a powerful groundswell of awareness and action that will benefit academia (Women & Leadership Australia, 2018).

At the institutional and departmental levels, women in leadership programs are an increasingly familiar feature of the higher education landscape. These programs tended to have a number of core workshops covering key areas of leadership approaches, career design, personal branding, governance and management, and career decisions. Some may include mentoring programs, executive job shadowing series, elective internal leadership program options, and ongoing networking opportunities (e.g., Griffith University's Women in Leadership Program and the Leneen Forde Future Leaders Program,<sup>1</sup> University of Wollongong's Leadership Program for Senior Academic Women,<sup>2</sup> and the University of

Queensland's Career Advancement for Senior Academic Women Program<sup>3</sup>).

At the University of Melbourne, the Academic Women in Leadership program is one of several strategies aimed at addressing women's underrepresentation in higher level academic appointments and on key policy, decision-making, and governance bodies. The program is conducted under the auspices of Academic Board, sponsored by the Provost, and supported by a reference group whose role is to guide and advise the contents of the program and actively advocate for the program. The program runs over eight months and targets women academics at Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor levels. The aim is to enhance their understanding of leadership in the university context; affirm and enhance existing strengths, leadership and management skills, and abilities; increase organizational knowledge of the university; extend networking opportunities; facilitate engagement with both internal and external senior role models; and explore through a gender frame of reference. Generally, the program involves approximately eight half- or full-day development sessions; a shadowing component of three to five days; two one-hour individual career coaching sessions; and group project planning meetings, as arranged by the project groups.<sup>4</sup>

Women-only programs and initiatives that aim to inspire and support emerging and current leaders provide acknowledgment that the challenges and barriers for women thriving in academia are different. These programs and initiatives demystify leadership roles in higher education and give academic women opportunities to engage and learn from others, as well as build confidence to step up and step forward. For institutions, it provides them opportunities for succession planning and tap into a pool of talent and expertise that can help transform innovative ways to lead in the twenty-first

century. Some of these programs have been running for many years. This should be enough time to see movement within the hierarchy and see more women reach higher levels of leadership within the institution. The question is if these programs are working to empower women (we would argue yes), is this enough to reshape the role of women in higher educational leadership?

### VOICES FROM WITHIN

In this section, we offer several brief narratives from our experiences. All four of us have participated in one or more of these programs at the University of Melbourne and offer insights and perspectives that embody many of the best attributes of empowerment and engaged citizens of the academy. We hope that these brief narratives provide some inspiration about your own effort and thinking as you thrive through academia.

#### Mentoring and Sponsorship – Rita Hardiman

The world of academia can be bewildering, particularly for those at the beginning of their academic journey. There is no clear, common path to a fulfilling career. This is particularly the case for female academics in male-dominated fields or in fields with a gender imbalance at the lower and higher academic levels. It is difficult to think about your career progression strategically if you are trailblazing your journey. In addition, the gendered barriers in leadership pathways may not be apparent to women starting out.

Good mentoring and attention to sponsorship can become a key determinant of success and enjoyment of academic life. A

good mentor is someone who can help identify positive career directions from an external perspective. A good sponsor is someone who will unselfishly and specifically promote a candidate's abilities.

I was fortunate that I did not have to work hard to find a good mentor and sponsor. My doctorate supervisor could see what I needed and what would work in my favor before I was able to see it myself. He had so much experience and a wide network and usually found an appropriate opportunity for me. Later in my career, a colleague really pushed me to apply for awards and to participate in projects to boost my profile: she saw potential in me that I still didn't recognize.

Sponsorship of academics is important to having a sense of ownership and belonging in academia. To be suggested for roles commensurate with your academic abilities builds confidence and allows others to see skills you have developed.

At this point on my path in academia, I have a clearer idea of how to support colleagues than I did for myself. That is an important part of the process: the ability to then mentor others who can benefit from such support. After completing the Academic Women in Leadership program at the University of Melbourne, I am more aware of the aspects of gender that can hinder approaches to leadership. It's really important to make female mentees aware of these issues early so they can tackle leadership pathways with these issues in mind.

My mentorship involved lots of conversations about my thoughts on different topics, showing confidence in me to troubleshoot challenging research issues, encouragement to apply for grants and awards, and involving me in decision-making so that I could practise thinking strategically in a research context. One of the biggest lessons I learned from this particular mentorship was that I could "be myself" in academia. I didn't feel like I must change my real self to

progress (that doesn't mean personal development didn't happen – it certainly did, still does, and should).

Rather than direct advice, mentorship involves focused reflection, and workshopping thoughts and plans. It was always refreshing to exchange ideas and perspectives with my mentors: to hear their experiences and how these defined their values made me reflect on my development.

Mentorship and sponsorship involve the development of a wide network of colleagues, collaborators, and peers so that you can start to support and be supported by a larger group of people than your immediate colleagues. A wide network helps you to look outside your close environment (Department, School, Faculty, and University) for ideas and strategies and helps develop your own sponsorship abilities.

In the late stages of my supervisor's career, I was once mistaken for his daughter. His reply was that I was his "academic daughter," and that is exactly what mentorship and sponsorship felt like, within a now much larger academic family.

#### Teaching as an International Academic – Iderlina Mateo-Babiano

Universities around the world have increasingly recognized the benefits that internationalization brings into teaching and learning. One notable feature of internationalizing higher education in Australia is the dramatic rise in the recruitment of academics from overseas into the country. Figures from the Australia's Department of Education and Training show that almost one in two academics working in an Australian university was born overseas (DET, 2016 cited in Oishi, 2017), clearly demonstrating that international academics comprise a significant proportion of Australia's higher education sector.

I am an international academic. I was very fortunate to take on a Level B lecturer position a few months after migrating to Australia. Indeed, my international background and experience became a distinct advantage when I went for a teaching and research role. Moreover, having studied and worked in several international settings enabled me to embed my experience into my teaching. In research, international collaborators helped strengthen my grant applications.

Yet, adapting to a new normal – a different social, cultural, and academic environment – was very challenging. Australian academia is distinctly different from the way that I have been accustomed to working and doing things. For instance, I perceived an air of “casualness” in how students behaved in the classroom, which I misinterpreted as a general lack of respect. I experienced a steep learning curve in understanding different teaching and learning strategies, and the need for me to learn a learning management system contributed to my feeling of inadequacy. Navigating a higher educational setting with implicit rules of engagement and research expectations brought more stress to my professional as well as personal life. I experienced academic culture shock that persisted beyond my first year in academia, resulting in significant personal cost, affecting both my teaching and research. It took me a significant amount of time to purposefully navigate ways to better integrate into the Australian academic setting. On hindsight, I feel that more time and resources are required for Australian higher education to better understand the issues of international academics and to provide more responsive social support systems to help international academics like me make the necessary transitions to thrive in a new academic culture.

One of the strategies I found helpful was completing a teaching in higher education program. The program gave me an authentic classroom experience. It provided an example of

what an Australian higher education classroom could look and feel like. The strategies shared by other participants in the program gave me ideas and helped improve my teaching strategies and skills. The workshops also allowed me to network with several colleagues across the university, while the materials and research we completed as part of the program opened up opportunities to publish a number of refereed publications.

Another helpful strategy was being able to find formal and informal mentors and sponsors. I proactively sought mentors who helped me make better sense and judgment on major decisions that I needed to make. I valued their sharing of experience and their feedback when I went for promotion, when I applied for grants, and even seeking feedback on journal manuscripts. Sponsors were also helpful in introducing leadership opportunities.

Australian higher education has already made significant headway in diversifying academia and promoting equality in the workplace. However, international academics, particularly those from an Asian background, continue to be underrepresented in leadership (Saltmarsh & Swirski, 2010). Asian countries have become important source nations not only in attracting international students but also attracting skilled academics (Hugo, 2010), yet the study of Oishi (2017) highlighted the persistently low representation of Asian Australian academics in higher education leadership. For Australia to play a leading role in this Asian century, it is important to recognize the value of our academic's international experience, backgrounds, and networks as platforms to engage Australian higher education institutions more closely with our Asian neighbors. Positive outcomes can only be achieved if we are able to transform Australian academia into more inclusive places for all academics to thrive.

### Finding an Authentic and Moral Voice – Kate Howell

Women leaders are not common in STEMM disciplines, but in my field of applied microbiology, there are more women moving into the higher levels of leadership. The key to success as a graduate researcher and postdoctorate fellow in laboratory-based life science research is attention to detail, careful experimental design and interpretation, and long hours in the lab. Looking around as a junior researcher, the laboratory and university leaders I interacted with were big, charismatic personalities of formidable intellect and physical presences. Seeing a place for myself and imagining that I have the characteristics of a leader has taken time and reflection.

It is important to recognize that the same strategies that make you successful in laboratory-based research do not necessarily translate to leadership strategies. The role of the strong personality leading a lab, winning big research grants, and leading a complex team is a “type.” I believe there is a lack of role models displaying different modes of leading in a highly competitive environment. Perhaps, women have not broken through some leadership barriers because of the perception of the big and loud leader. As I started on a reflective practice about leadership in my role as an academic, and to see that indeed, there were different strategies displayed to leadership and that some of the people I admired the most were displaying and actively practicing “authentic leadership” traits.

Three central themes emerge from the literature on authentic leadership, and those are appreciating that the leader must be self-aware, there is an emphasis on the true self, and authentic leaders have a strong grounding in moral leadership (Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). Indeed, self-reflection and understanding of principles and motivations are central to moving toward authentic leadership.

Empirical studies have noted that displaying these characteristics have positive outcomes for trust in leadership, satisfaction with supervisors, leader and follower well-being, and organizational commitment (Hopkins & O'Neil, 2015). Clearly, embracing these characteristics have important and measurable outcomes for the leader in the workplace.

However, this journey does not come easily. Long-term training in the norms and expectations of a scientific discipline constantly undermine my leadership journey as the “think leader, think male” mindset to encourage, enhance, and reward assertiveness and competitiveness continues to dominate leadership. Using a quieter and less assertive voice in the hurly-burly of the academic department may mean less immediate impact, but as I am finding can have considerable long-term benefits as I build a leadership profile that emphasizes collaboration and discussion underpinned by strong moral considerations. The pendulum swings and I find myself adjusting, reassessing, and examining my attributes and leadership qualities.

Becoming self-aware of my position as an Anglo-Australian, straight, and rather left-wing academic in a large public university is ongoing. I read with interest and some discomfort of the career challenges experienced by other women, particularly of color, socioeconomic classes different to my own, women from recently arrived immigrant backgrounds, and women who identify as LGBTQTI+. These stories are emerging, with strong voices and compelling conundrums. The academic establishment, including the nascent women leaders in STEMM disciplines, need to listen, learn, and welcome these stories. Leadership should include a diversity of female voices to ensure that the academy is truly inclusive and diverse and to reflect the society in which it serves. Becoming self-aware of positional power in the

academy is necessary and should be embraced by women as they embark on their leadership journeys.

Step Up, Step Forward: Leading in  
Academia – Marian Mahat

*If leadership is about initiating and mobilising  
change, we have much to learn from women.*

(Nixon & Sinclair, 2017, p. ix)

Leadership facilitates changemaking, and in academia, where the landscape keeps shifting, this becomes more important than ever. For women in leadership, the challenges are complex and well documented in the literature. These challenges include gendered institutional cultures, formal and informal gendered practices, individual factors, and caring responsibilities. Whatever the challenges, women in academia know it too well – we live it, experience it, and develop coping strategies to overcome it.

Experiences gleaned from discussions with senior women academics – at conferences, over food and beverages, along corridors – are that there is no one right way to build a leadership career. There are rare examples of those that had taken a “whole of career” perspective, planning research and teaching activities and identifying roles and experiences they needed to get there. In most cases, leadership careers were unplanned, and women go about different routes and journeys to get where they are. The point here is that someone else’s success does not diminish your value and accomplishments.

Advices are a plenty when it comes to leading in higher education. But what might work best for some might not work for others. You choose the path and develop strategies that work for you – one that fits not only with your values and

your interests but also with how you want to balance your professional and personal lives. Coming from a more positivist view of the world – understanding and interpreting the world around me through reason and logic – I took a more deliberate (some might say tactical) perspective of my career. Barriers – limited opportunities, limited mentoring and sponsorship, and internal thoughts and feelings (impostor syndrome, feelings of lack of readiness, etc.) – were had. This was resolved through ongoing reflection and “picking” myself up off the floor every so often.

Leadership is not just a role. It is lived and practiced through one’s daily actions and interactions. One can practice leadership in whatever role one occupies – be it a Research Assistant or a member of a committee – leadership is not only about the ability to lead others but the ability to lead oneself and to amplify your impact as an individual. As an individual, you bring many strengths to leadership that you will leverage to address your identified challenges. These “markers” provide me point of references for stepping up and stepping forward in academia.

- Remind yourself of your values – Your values are your road maps. Pay close enough attention to what your values are trying to tell you and always stay true to them.
- Tackle issues not people – Take an evidence-based approach that addresses the underlying issues, not simply throwing faults or confronting individuals.
- Assume positive intent – When you assume positive intent, your emotional quotient goes up because you are no longer almost random in your response.

- Do not take things personally – This relates to assuming positive intent. When you're defensive, you stop listening. And when you stop listening, you shut out critical information that could benefit you.
- Engage, be present – It is hard to be present in a cluttered head space. Genuine freedom comes from learning to be mindful and present in each moment.

### STRATEGIES FOR THRIVING

We all aim to attain a successful career in life. The target and focus might be different, and success can be measured in myriad ways. If you ask others what success looks like, you will find numerous answers. But there is one common element in those answers – do what you are most passionate about. The following tips can help you make progress toward doing what you love:

- Be open and be self-aware. Being self-aware means we focus our attention on ourselves, and we evaluate and compare our current behavior to our internal standards and values. We become self-conscious as objective evaluators of ourselves. Self-awareness is a critical tool to help you reach higher levels of job satisfaction, become a better leader, improve relationships with colleagues, and manage your emotions better.
- Try to find collaborators in academia (in research, learning and teaching, and leadership roles) who are aligned with your principles. It is a rewarding experience to find others to work with on a particular project, who share the same or similar attitudes to ethics, education, equity, and passion for the work we are doing. When you find like-minded individuals, the “bundle of twigs” can do more than a single twig.

- When you find a trusted mentor, do not be afraid to talk about the inevitable crises of confidence. The right mentor can provide advice and connections that help you reach heights that would be impossible alone. Find others to help with mentorship and sponsorship: work together. The larger your network, the more you will hear others' concerns as well. Listen to them – you'll feel less lonely!
- Be vocal about your career aims and desires, and ask for help. People will help you if they know where you want to go.

Women, more often than not, fall into the trap of believing that leadership skills need to be polished and prominent in order to “start” leading. Practice makes perfect, but you cannot practice if you do not give yourselves opportunities to lead and empower others. One way to step into leadership is to surround yourself in a circle of support. Support has to be genuine in order for it to work. If we are divided, we will be no stronger than a single twig in that bundle. Collectively, we have impact.

#### NOTES

1. See website: <https://www.griffith.edu.au/staff/learning-development/programs/women-in-leadership>.
2. See website: <https://universe.uow.edu.au/community/uows-academic-womens-leadership-program-named-australias-best/>.
3. See website: <https://staff.uq.edu.au/information-and-services/development/career-progression/advancement-senior-academic-women>.
4. See website: <https://staff.unimelb.edu.au/human-resources/career-development-training/training-courses/academic-leaders>.

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