

Women leaders in a South African higher education institution: Narrations of their leadership operations

Tumo Kele ^a, Jacqueline Pietersen ^b

^a Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, Sandton, South Africa.

^b University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

Corresponding author: kelet@gibs.co.za

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Abstract: Transformation of higher education in South Africa included among others, forcing institutions of higher learning to implement policies aimed at elevating women to managerial positions. Although the challenges to get to the desired government objectives are still there, universities have not been making a fast progress. Focusing on women already occupying managerial positions, this paper explored their lived experiences, views and attitudes about their roles in higher education leadership.

A random sample of eight female managers at an urban traditional university in South Africa was interviewed about their personal experiences as managers in higher education and difficulties associated with being a woman in management. The sample included Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans of faculties, Heads of Departments and Executive Directors. The results were transcribed and analysed with the aid of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti.

The results suggested that, women are not afraid to make unpopular decisions. Women are also more considerate of others (peers) when taking decisions, especially in delicate situations where politics play a greater role. Additionally, it emerged from the study that empowerment of other people by not silencing or oppressing them is notable and important among women managers.

Keywords: higher education, women managers, leadership, universities, South Africa

Introduction

History has shown that, females, regardless of their race, have been underrepresented in leadership positions in South African higher education institutions for quite some time. However, some institutions are making progress and there are a number of women who are steadily rising to the top structures of executive management. Although 23 universities in South Africa have had a slight increase in women on an executive level, the ratio between men and women on this level is still disproportionate. The underrepresentation of women in management positions in educational institutions, therefore, continues to be a matter of concern (Priola, 2007).

Additionally, despite their lesser presence in administrative and managerial posts, some research shows high levels of satisfaction among employees where women are leaders in organisations (Yáñez & Moreno, 2008). Despite these positive research findings in other countries, there is still an overrepresentation of white males in senior managerial positions in certain universities in South Africa. This trend is still continuing despite legislative frameworks aimed at redressing these imbalances in the country. As Kerfoot and Knights (1998) found out, like any other sector, the higher education sector finds itself struggling to eliminate a very traditional and masculine culture and implementing structural changes for universities to still carry their scholarly role with integrity. The Higher Education South Africa found out in 2007 that only three Vice-Chancellors out of 23 universities in South Africa were women and five out of 23 registrars were women (HER-SA, 2007). Since then, the picture has not changed much and these inequalities are still in place.

At the centre of this paper are the questions that authors pursue to explore in examining the experience of women managers in higher education institutions at the period when universities are transforming. The questions were:

- what were the greatest challenges they ever faced since their appointments and how were solutions accomplished?
- are these women strategic thinkers and decision makers?
- whether they involve staff in key decision making positions?

Researchers chose these questions since the gender dimension of universities in South Africa since mergers and restructuring has not yet received enough research attention. To elicit these critical factors that contribute to many leaders' success stories, this paper approached the research from the qualitative research design's angle.

Literature Background

After the announcement of mergers, South African universities have undergone serious transformational changes in line with legislative requirements and policies. Among others, the changes insisted on the need to appoint more women in positions of authority. The kind of leadership that is depicted in organisations from different sectors and industries has been the focal point for many researchers. Thus, the ascending of women to managerial positions could be used to test if indeed this doctrine holds (Yáñez & Moreno, 2008). Good leaders are known to be role models in their organisations and foster a culture of trust and confidence among their subordinates.

In South Africa, women have always been in the second stratum of society, regardless of their race (Mathur-Helm, 2005). To counter this unfair practice, the government enacted the affirmative action legislation as part of the national strategy to redress the imbalances of the past. Thus, women concerns came to fore both within government departments and corporate sector. Matters like equality, human rights, empowerment and welfare got immense attention. With the help from the Gender Policy Framework (GPF), policies aimed at addressing imbalances of the past were drafted and signed into laws. Included to this process was the drafting of procedures and practices aimed at ensuring that women are afforded equal opportunities in all sectors of the South African economy (Mathur-Helm, 2005).

The figures below depict the recent (2012) percentages of female managers relative to male managers in traditional and universities of technology in South Africa. Clearly, there is still a huge difference in percentages of females in management positions occupying senior positions in higher education institutions relative to their male counterparts. These statistics does not include race as a variable.

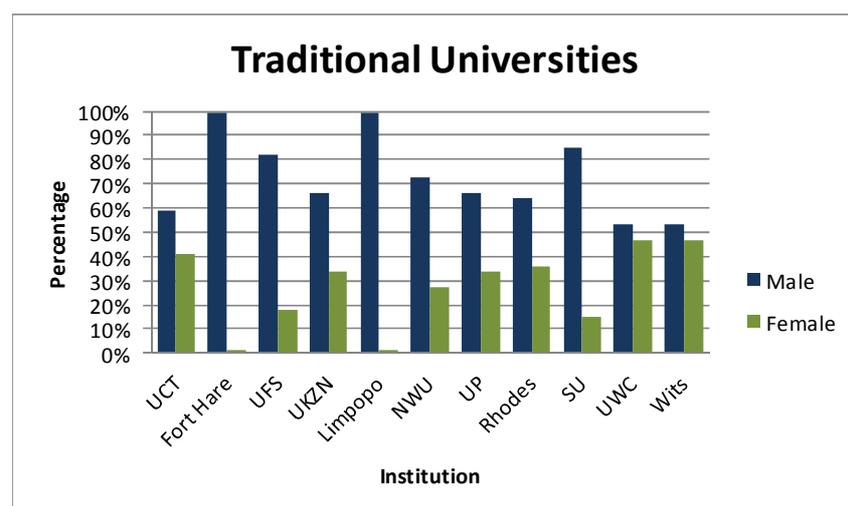


Figure 1: Male v/s Female managers in South African traditional universities

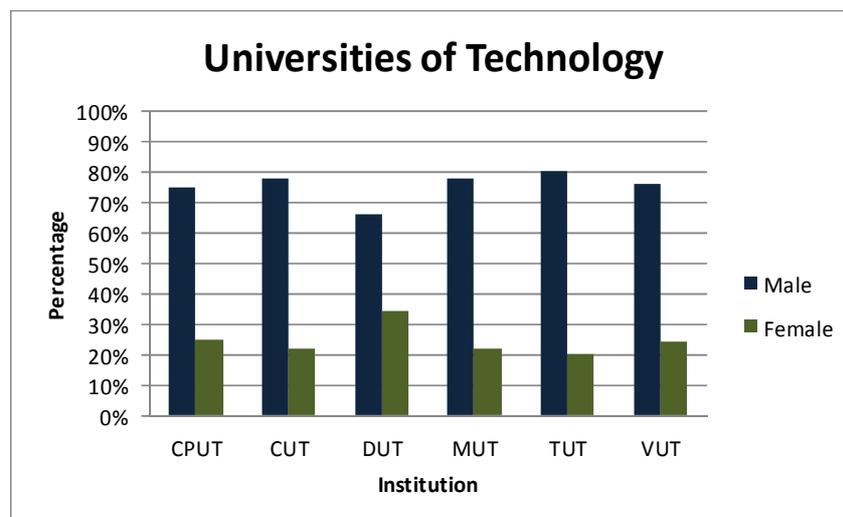


Figure 2: Male v/s Female managers in South African universities of universities

As Schmuck (1996) explained, women who have achieved getting into positions which are predominantly held by men have realized that, consciously or unconsciously, that there are social roles and expectations governing the manner in which females should carry themselves. Unfortunately, these expectations do not coincide with the manner in which they should act in their work environments. To make a success in their workplace, they are referred to as 'abnormal' women and must rise above the social expectations of femaleness in order to aspire to the socially prescribed role of leader. Also, even in lower administrative positions, women still possess the 'abnormal' status should they be good at what they do (Coleman, 2003). The extreme could be the labels of being bitchy or dragon ladies (Chin, 2004).

Methodology

To elicit factors that might be contributing to their challenges at work and leadership, this paper looks at some critical points that define a leader at a university.

As mentioned earlier, the study adopted a qualitative research design. A total of six interviews with female managers in one urban South African traditional university were conducted.

The central questions posed were:

- To what extent do participants involve staff in decision making?
- To what extent do participants integrate strategic management in their departments?

Data collection and target Sample

For this study, a purposive sample of eight women occupying executive positions at the urban South African university were interviewed. The sample included Deputy Vice Chancellors, Executive Deans, Executive Directors and heads of department. The purposive sampling technique is a non-probability method in identifying primary participants (Welman & Kruger, 1999). Researchers used their own judgment to select the sample based on the purpose of the research (Littrell & Nkomo, 2005). "Convenience sampling is used in some case studies because the purpose of the study is not to estimate some population value, but to select cases from which one can learn most" (Thomas & Nelson, 2001:281). Thus, a selection of women occupying management positions in a chosen higher education institution was selected. The researcher used internet searches to identify appropriate respondents. Interviews were arranged with the participants through e-mails and telephonic enquiries.

Participants were subjected to open-ended interviews through a pre-prepared semi-structured questionnaire which was used to guide researchers. Personal interviewing is one of the most used types of data collection (Emory & Cooper, 1995). Research suggests that interviews are associated with both positivist and phenomenological methodologies (Collis & Hussey, 2003) as employed within the ambit of this study. All the interviews were held in the interviewees' chosen places either during or after working hours. Interviews were all roughly one hour each. As

Bennett, Glatter and Le Vacic (1994:36) advised that, "spending an equal amount of interview time with each interviewee ensures consistency which leads to trustworthiness of the study".

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis (Deem, 2002). Furthermore, researchers made personal notes during the interviews to assist them with coding during the analysis. Data analysis was done with the aid of Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software after which the data was grouped according to themes and codes.

Research Results

Women seemed not to be afraid of making tough management decisions and standing by them no matter the situation. As this female manager commented: 'Yeah, as I've said, leadership for me is also about the sustainability and the good of the collective in the long-term and also making the painful decision to say No'. This comment corroborates with the research findings that women are competent leaders (Reinhold, 2005). Also, another female manager commented about her style: 'Then I will take the power to make the executive decision in the interest of everybody at heart'

Additionally, women were found to be strategic thinkers, as this manager comments: 'And for the staff, the changes that I'd suggested were new things for them - things that they didn't think about before and kind of rocked the boat'. Also, women in this institution believed in the quality of leadership their institution have, as this respondent comments: 'I think in our own institution we are very blessed with the quality of the leadership at an executive level, but then also on a peer level'. A testimony that not all institutions do have stereotyped managers about women, but progression to managerial positions takes time. Another respondent commented: 'We have a strong leadership team - good solid people that really can get things done'.

Another key determinant in successful leadership is involving or consulting with subordinates before making decisions so that a manager could find a buy-in. As this lady comment: 'Yes, I always consult beforehand. I was, one of the courses that made an impact on me was the concept of situational leadership where you, depending on the context, adapt your style'. Training and development seemed to have played a positive role in shaping this lady for management. Thus, customised short-learning programmes organised by universities are essential and should be broadened.

Furthermore, another female manager touched on the very important part of leadership, cultural intelligence (Ng, Van Dyne & Ang, 2009). As she responded in this study alluded, "it could be challenging when one operates in a cultural environment that differs from your own, but it is seldom that all good decisions would come from the leader alone, it is usually a team work with people from different backgrounds". Pityana (2003:4) also asserts that cultural diversity should really be regarded as an "opportunity for intellectual dialogue". In other words, diversity could be seen as varied perspectives and approaches that different identity groups offer (Thomas & Ely, 2001:36). Koen and Bitzer (2010:12) believe that a team approach can overcome critical barriers and transform diversity into unity that brings fruitful results for the organisations.

According to Gregory, Lumpkin and Taylor (2005), leaders must fully understand the dynamic interactions of internal and external forces impacting on the organisation. Deducing from another female manager, "When I arrived in this University, there was no strategic thinking around teaching, nothing at all. But I think not single-handedly, but with many other people, we've been able to put undergraduate teaching and learning within the broader strategy of the University". This indicates that a "strategic decision" was made to change internal operations by implementing the strategy that would better the teaching at the university.

Conclusions

The results of this study are very disturbing and should be tackled as a matter of urgency. Higher education institutions in South Africa are still unconsciously gender biased, regardless of how much women have proven themselves. Recognition should be realised by university councils that women are consensus makers and having them in senior management positions could assist in alleviating some problems. University councils should force their executive managers to implement equity plans and comply with government policies about women empowerment.

Research (Buller, 2006) argues that leadership as a construct is a concrete and observable phenomenon, yet no consensus has been reached on the exact characteristics of a successful leader in higher education. The researchers are of the opinion that the characteristic of transformational leadership with sound management skills define a good female leader in higher education.

In some instances the women experienced gender stereotypes and misconceptions about their ability which became barriers to the progression of their careers. Other challenges faced by the participants relate to the management of processes, human resources and organisational politics. The latter being factors that research (Cai & Kleiner, 1999) suggested to be perceived attributes necessary for management positions but lacking in women.

The gender dimension of universities is very fundamental and its activities should be planned in a joint consultative process. Universities should come to the realization that healthy and progressive relations are shaped by inclusive practices at all levels of any organisation. This is because innovative ideas are not essentially the product of a single gender or sector of society. South African government should also fast track the implementation of equality laws as things have not really progressed as expected. Race seems to also be a huge problem and this is very demoralizing to people with capabilities but having to break through the race glass ceiling.

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