

# Employability of women managers in higher education sector: a study on their leadership qualities

Menaha Shanmugam,

Research Institute for the Built and Human Environment, University of Salford

(email: [m.shanmugam@pgr.salford.ac.uk](mailto:m.shanmugam@pgr.salford.ac.uk))

Dilanthi Amaratunga,

Research Institute for the Built and Human Environment, University of Salford

(email: [r.d.g.amaratunga@salford.ac.uk](mailto:r.d.g.amaratunga@salford.ac.uk))

Richard Haigh,

Research Institute for the Built and Human Environment, University of Salford

(email: [r.p.haigh@salford.ac.uk](mailto:r.p.haigh@salford.ac.uk))

## Abstract

The teaching profession both in this country and internationally is, with few exceptions, dominated by women as it has traditionally been seen as a 'suitable' job for women. However, a look at the statistics reveals that despite the large number of women in the profession, they are greatly under-represented in positions of management in higher education (HE). Thus this under-representation of women continues to be a matter of some concern. The background of this paper identifies the status of women managers within the higher education sector. The leadership styles typically adopted by women managers are then discussed. These styles are taken into further analysis in order to find out whether any such styles are of use in terms of filling the leadership gaps in higher education. In this context, this paper examines the literature relating to gender, leadership styles and higher education in order to explore how the leadership qualities of women managers will have a contribution towards the higher education sector.

**Keywords:** Higher education sector, leadership, women managers

## 1. Background

The higher education sector is characterised by specific aspects that make it distinguishable from the business world. However, in higher education, as well as in business, men and masculine values are dominant [1]. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) female students in higher education institutions in the UK reached nearly 45% in 2001. Research revealed that the women entering higher education in the UK has continued to increase over recent years and now account for over 50% of students [2]. However, the participation rate of women at senior management level in higher education is relatively low. The senior management level, in this paper, refers to academic professionals such as professors, senior lecturers and senior researchers in higher education institutions. Table 1 below shows the status of the academic professionals by gender.

*Table 1: Full-time academic staff by grade and gender in 2005/06*

| Tests                                 | Female       | Male         | Total         | Female<br>2004/05<br>(%) | Female<br>2005/06<br>(%) |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Professors                            | 2320         | 11730        | 14050         | 15.8                     | 16.5                     |
| Senior lecturers & senior researchers | 7575         | 17015        | 24590         | 29                       | 30.8                     |
| Lecturers                             | 14900        | 20075        | 34975         | 41.8                     | 42.6                     |
| Researchers                           | 12330        | 16930        | 29260         | 42.2                     | 42.1                     |
| Other grades                          | 3620         | 4915         | 8540          | 42.5                     | 42.4                     |
| <b>Total</b>                          | <b>40745</b> | <b>70665</b> | <b>111410</b> | <b>36.1</b>              | <b>36.6</b>              |

*Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)*

The proportion of full-time female academic staff has risen slightly from 36.1% in 2004/05 to 36.6% in 2005/06. Full-time female academics account for around 42% of staff members at lecturer, researcher and other grades. At the grade of 'senior lecturers & senior researchers', females represent 30.8% of full-time staff, while at professorial level, just over 1 in 6 full-time staff are female. Compared to 2004/05 there has been a small increase in the proportion of females at 'professor' and 'senior lecturers & senior researchers' levels, while at other levels the split in gender has remained almost static. However, managers in education are predominantly male though there is some evidence of a growing willingness of women to take up leadership positions in higher education.

The major reason for this under-representation of women at senior management level in higher education is the barrier women face to progress their career in educational leadership [3, 4, 5]. Socialisation and stereotyping are the major barriers for women seeking a senior position in education. Some internal barriers such as lack of confidence, lack of competitiveness and fear of failure have also been identified for women's entry into leadership positions [3, 4].

In this context, this paper reviews the employability of women at senior management positions in the higher education sector. The leadership concept cannot be entirely discounted when discussing the employability of women at managerial level as organisations have paid attention to the leadership styles of the people who occupy managerial positions, holding the belief that it is an important factor in achieving business success [6]. In recent years, both mainstream management literature and organisational policy show evidence of a marked turn to leadership rather than management as the means to enhance organisational performance in contemporary organisations. This is matched by a growing trend in the UK to attribute ever-greater significance to leadership as a way of solving organisational problems not only within the

private sector, but also within the public sector in general, across education (in schools and in universities), health and local government organisations [7].

Accordingly this paper first identifies the leadership gaps in higher education and then the leadership styles typically adopted by women managers. These findings will lead to the discussions on the employability of women managers within the higher education sector.

## **2. Leadership in higher education**

Leadership is defined as ‘the ability to influence – either directly or indirectly – the behaviour, thought, and actions of a significant number of individuals’ [8]. Educational leadership refers to “leadership influence through the generation and dissemination of educational knowledge and instructional information, development of teaching programmes and supervision of teaching performance” [9, p166]. The real issue in leadership differences lies in the equity in selecting the right person with the appropriate skills and qualities to ensure the effectiveness and success of the organisation [10].

The number of students studying at universities and colleges has increased dramatically, with over 2 million students at higher education institutions today. Higher education is part of ‘lifelong learning’, which is not limited to the compulsory school years, but extends through an adult’s working life and sometimes into retirement [11].

The main purposes of higher education as per the Higher Education Funding Council for England- (HEFCE) [11] are to:

- enable people to develop their capabilities and fulfil their potential, both personally and at work;
- advance knowledge and understanding through scholarship and research; and
- contribute to an economically successful and culturally diverse nation.

The nature of higher education in the UK has changed significantly over the past years. During the last 5-10 years UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have been developing and implementing significant levels of structural change, influenced by both internal and external policy and environmental developments [12]. These changes appear to have been made in the formal and informal structures. The senior management structure of many institutions is being re-framed or conceptually restructured. As a result the balance of power between groups at different levels is changing and identifying the focus of power and influence within senior management has become more difficult and complex [12]. Consequently it may affect the efficient functioning of senior management in higher education.

Birnbaum [13] argues that, in general, interventions from leaders should be limited in order to allow the self-correcting mechanisms of the institution to operate effectively. In relation to that,

Kathleen [14] also argues that the traditional sense of providing direction in the carrying out of tasks was likely to be less significant for professionals like university employees than for some other occupational groups. Supporting these arguments, Bryman [15] revealed that the traditional form of leadership may sometimes be more significant for the problems it can foster than for its benefits. This suggests that a key issue in higher education is not so much about what leaders should do, but what they should avoid doing.

Mumford [16] identified some of the characteristics of the managers who are good developers of their staff. These characteristics include: “drawing out the strengths and weaknesses of their staff rather than suppressing them; rewarding their people both materially and psychologically for the risks that they take in attempting to develop themselves; positively seek to identify learning opportunities for staff; giving personal time to the development of staff; involving their subordinates in some of their own tasks and not simply delegating tasks they do not wish to do themselves; share some of their problems and anxieties with their staff as one way of enhancing staff development; listening rather than talking; not seeking to shape individuals as replicas of themselves; and taking risks on the desired results of the departments in pursuit of relevant learning opportunities for their people”. These characteristics could be closely linked to that of a leader in the centre of the organisation and not at the top.

Effective leadership is a success of any organisation and academia is no exception to this. In a recent research, Spendlove [17] identified the competencies for effective leadership in higher education as shown in Table 2.

*Table 2: Competencies for effective leadership in higher education*

| <b>Attitudes</b><br><b>What good leaders are</b>   | <b>Knowledge</b><br><b>what good leaders know</b>   | <b>Behaviour</b><br><b>what good leaders do</b>   |
|--|---|---|
| Self-aware<br>Flexible<br>Open<br>Honest<br>Discrete<br>Visible, outgoing<br>Willing to be wrong/accept advice/support<br>Sensitive to the views of others | Knowledge of university life<br>Understand how the university system works<br>Understand academic processes | Work to maintain academic credibility/respect<br>Act as role models<br>Think broadly/strategically<br>Engage with people<br>Listen to others<br>Consult with others<br>Negotiate<br>Communicate clearly<br>Delegate<br>Motivate others<br>Act as mentors<br>Build |

The above table illustrates that the attitudes and behaviours for an effective leadership in higher education tends to lean more towards people-oriented than task-oriented. Thus, leadership in today's academia must take into account the needs and demands of various stakeholders and to include these major stakeholders in the change process [18]. The practice of transformational leadership by the department Chair, has been found to be related to faculty satisfaction and a willingness to expend the extra effort required in the change process [19]. However, Pounder [20] found that the styles of leadership that reflects a combination of transactional and transformational dimensions may be most effective in providing the university with the flexibility it needs to make subsequent changes. New systems of management that emphasise behaviours such as nurturing and caring, interpersonal sensitivity and preference for open and cooperative relationships, have been advocated as the most effective response to change in an organisation's environment [21]. Nevertheless, the traits and behaviours of the individual leader matter in terms of determining the effectiveness of the leadership styles that are practiced.

The following sections discuss the influence of gender over the leadership styles and the leadership styles typically adopted by women managers.

### **3. Gender and leadership**

Although mainstream research on leadership generally continues to ignore gender relations, over recent years there has been a major expansion of international research on gender relations in leadership, organisations and management [22]. Fitzgerald [23] suggests that it is impossible to create conceptualisations of leading and managing without taking into account issues of gender. The way gender is defined by society determines how a male or a female should behave within a society. This also seems to affect the leadership characteristics men and women exhibit. These gender role definitions can be discussed in two broad perspectives. One perspective assumes gender as a social institution and thus the role that men and women perform are defined by society. The second perspective argues that gender is a biologically determined element, and thus, the gender role is determined by the biological nature of the male or female. Researchers have tried to find out the relationship between gender role and leadership style as they assume that gender role is an important personality trait that influences leadership style. Some researchers found differences in leadership styles between men and women, whereas others argue that there are no significant differences [24].

Discussions on the gendered differentiation of leadership have centered on the different qualities and styles of leadership of men and women; that is, the so-called masculine and feminine styles of leadership [25]. While men still dominate leadership positions, research suggests that when women do occupy leadership positions, they display different leadership styles compared to men. The presence of feminine or masculine characteristics in leadership styles is related to the construct of gender [26]. Thus, they have related masculinity with task-oriented leadership style and femininity with relationship-oriented leadership styles. Male gender qualities are characterised as aggressive, independent, objective, logical, rational, analytical, decisive, confident, assertive, ambitious, opportunistic and impersonal. These are distinguished from

female gender qualities that are characterised as emotional, sensitive, expressive, cooperative, intuitive, warm, tactful, receptive to ideas, talkative, gentle, empathetic, and submissive [27].

Contrary to the above discussion, some researchers argue that there are no significant differences in leadership styles between men and women. Powell [28] in his analysis of a number of research studies found that male and female leaders exhibit similar amounts of task-oriented and people-oriented leadership characteristics. Further to this, Pounder and Coleman [29], citing a number of studies undertaken by various researchers (Davidson and Bruke, 1994; Brenner, 1982; Carless, 1998; Komives, 1991; Maher, 1997; Vilkanas and Carton, 1993, Thomson, 2000; Evetts, 1994) have summarised the idea of ‘little or no difference’ and ‘no evidence for any dissimilarity’ in the leadership styles, leadership effectiveness and competencies of men and women. Further, a study by Oshagbemi and Gill [30] examined gender differences and similarities in the leadership styles and behaviour of UK managers. Their study found that women managers delegate less than their male counterparts but their directive, consultative and participative leadership styles were similar. There are more similarities than differences found in their study on the leadership styles and behaviour of their managers, unlike the findings in other research studies where there are significant differences between males and female in the leadership styles and behaviour of their managers. However, the authors suggest that although women are relatively similar to men in behaviour and effectiveness, women leaders tend to be more participative and less autocratic.

#### **4. Leadership styles typically exhibited by women managers**

This section examines the leadership styles typically exhibited by women managers. The growing numbers of women in managerial positions have created interest in the concept of women as leaders [31]. As women increasingly have a more prominent presence as managers and executives in organisations, more attention has been devoted to the possible differences between the leadership styles of women and men. Intuitive reasoning suggests that early socialisation patterns develop different qualities in women and men that would likely result in variations in leadership styles [32].

Hey/McBer, a consulting firm, has leadership style typology which is based on the work of David McClelland [7]. Hey/McBer categorises leadership into six distinct styles based on two major classes: they are transactional and transformational [33]. Under transformational leadership, the most prominent behaviour used is inspirational motivation, followed by idealised attributes, intellectual stimulation, idealised behaviours, and individualised consideration. Under transactional leadership, the most prominent behaviour used is contingent reward, followed by management-by-exception active, and management-by-exception passive [34]. In this regard corrective style (‘do what I tell you’) and authoritative style (‘come with me’) fall under transactional style whereas affiliative style (‘people come first’), democratic style (‘what do you think’), pacesetter style (‘do as I do, now’) and coaching style (‘try this’) fall under the transformational leadership styles [33].

Female leaders seem to prefer a transformational leadership style [35]. Another research carried out by Rosener [36] revealed that women are more likely than men to use “transformational leadership”, i.e. motivating others by transforming their individual self-interest into the goals of the group. The characteristics of transformational leadership relate to female values developed through socialisation processes that include building relationships, communication, consensus building, power as influence, and working together for a common purpose. This is supported by Shane et al [37], stating that femininity is found to positively correlate with transformational leadership. Further several studies focusing on transformational leadership indicated that women are perceived, and perceive themselves, as using transformational leadership styles more than men [38]. Bass [39] and Bass and Stogdill [40] also suggest that women are slightly more likely to be described as charismatic, as women scored higher on transformation factor than men. This is further supported by Comer et al [41] where they noted that female business managers tend to be rated higher than male managers on the ‘individual consideration’ dimension of transformational leadership styles. Yammarino et al. [42] also noted that female leaders rather than male leaders tend to develop the individualised, unique relationships with subordinates necessary to effect the transformational leadership style. In describing nearly every aspect of management, women made reference to trying to make people feel part of the organisation from setting performance goals to determining strategy [36]. Men, on the other hand, were found to be more likely than women to: adopt “transactional” leadership styles (exchanging rewards or punishment for performance); use power that comes from their organisational position and formal authority [36]. Likewise, many authors refer to transformational leadership as a feminine leadership style. However, research by Hackman et al. [43] show that transformational leadership is a stereotypically gender-balanced style.

The notion of male and female gender qualities facilitates the argument that male gender qualities are oriented towards the more impersonal, task oriented or transactional approach to leadership, whereas female gender qualities tend towards more nurturing, relationships oriented style of leadership that underlies the transformational leadership approach [29]. Rigg and Sparrow [44] state that female leaders emphasised the team approach more than men and were regarded as more people oriented than their male counterparts, while male leaders were considered more paternalistic and authoritarian than female leaders. The empowering and collaborative style of leadership associated with women is also compared with the more directive and authoritarian style traditionally associated with male leaders. In other words, women seem to lead in a rather democratic way, while men show a more autocratic leadership style [45]. Research findings of Trinidad and Normore [46] show that women adopt democratic and participative leadership styles in the corporate world and in education.

Apart from these leadership styles women are said to be better than men in terms of multi-tasking. In a research carried out by Priola [47] almost all of the participants interviewed referred to multi-tasking, presenting it as a female quality and ability. The belief that women are better at managing different activities simultaneously finds its origins in the role of women in various societies. Priola’s research further identified four major discourses that refer to aspects generally associated with femininity when identifying female traits within educational institutions. These are: the ability to manage multi-tasks (including administration); people and

communication skills; the ability to focus on support and care for the staff; and the implementation of a team-based approach rather than an authoritarian style approach. The ability to juggle several things at once was reported as one of the differences between women and men in Deem's [48] study of 137 manager-academics (women and men). Helgesen [49] argues that women's central involvement in managing households, raising children and juggling careers gives them a capacity for prioritisation in a leadership role that men typically do not possess. Women are often carers of the family and the household in addition to external employment. Women are good in interpersonal and communication skills. Rosener's [36] study found that women managers put effort in building relationships and understanding the people they work with, so that they can adapt their style to each individual. Rosener [36] also found through her study that women use "interactive leadership" styles by encouraging participation, sharing power and information, enhancing peoples' self-worth. She further justified that women are much more likely than men to ascribe their power to interpersonal skills or personal contacts rather than to organisational stature. Women as leaders believe that people perform best when they feel good about themselves and their work, and the leaders try to create situations that contribute to that feeling. Earlier thinking emphasised that women who had achieved leadership positions were imitators of male characteristics, but later theories recognised feminine leadership styles [50]. Research into the feminisation of management suggested that contemporary managers were moving towards substituting the "masculine power" of decision-making, giving orders and being obeyed, with the power to give others (the work force) sustenance, nurture their growth and care for them [51].

## **5. Discussion**

The issues related to the status of women in senior management positions in higher education, leadership styles in higher education and the leadership styles typically exhibited by women managers are discussed in this paper. It is the fact that women are under-represented in managerial positions in higher education. In order to study the employability of women in managerial positions, the leadership style has been taken as the primary area of the research.

From the previous sections, it is apparent that the management structure within higher education has become more difficult and complex. More than just the activities involved, it is the people who are to be motivated and to be trained in order to promote them into a state of self-correction. Accordingly it is understood that the higher education institutions should be friendlier and more accommodating for employees and the gaps between people at different levels are to be minimised to achieve this. Thus maintaining a personal relationship is vital in higher education. This cannot simply be achieved by placing the whole responsibility on the shoulders of one single leader. Leadership in higher education is therefore more complex as people in these positions should have the ability to motivate employees to excel beyond what is expected through the use of individual consideration. This could closely be linked with the typical characteristics of women managers such as empowering employees, caring for others and listening to others.



Teamwork is also an issue that is to be encouraged in higher education in most instances, especially when undertaking research projects. Furthermore, the leadership role should include the establishment of priorities, the design of appropriate early warning and communication systems, the coordination and balancing of the various subsystems within the institution and the directing of attention, symbolically and actively, towards the priority areas. Women are good at multi-tasking and have the ability to prioritise. Female leadership styles encourage teamwork, personal relationships, caring, and nurturing qualities, as they tend to lead in a democratic and participative way.

In summary, we could see that the transformational leadership, which is largely used by women managers, could be the preferred leadership style in higher education.

## **6. Conclusion**

The higher education sector in the UK is changing and facing greater scrutiny and accountability from outside agencies that impact accreditation, funding and financial aid resources. The traditional sense of providing direction in the carrying out of tasks is likely to be less significant for professionals such as university employees. Therefore the idea of placing a traditional form of leadership in higher education sector is less convincing.

In summary, the democratic participative styles of consensus building, power as influence, working together for common purpose, ability to manage multi tasks, excellent interpersonal skills, caring and developing personal relationship are said to be the qualities typically exhibited by women managers. These qualities largely fall under the transformational approach of leadership.

However, leadership purely based on transformational style may not be sufficient. There could be instances where the leader has to use transactional style, for example when motivating people to perform in exchange of specific rewards. Similarly, when there is a situation where a job is required as a matter of urgency, the leader may have to use an authoritative style. Considering these, it cannot be concluded that higher education is effective merely with the transformational style of leadership. The managers, therefore, should be able to switch from one style to another depending on the situation.

Nevertheless, the authors intend to say that transformational leadership, which is largely used by women managers, could positively contribute to improve the higher education sector. Through this paper it could be concluded that the women have a greater potential to be employed in managerial positions within the higher education sector. An increase in the number of women managers in higher education will possibly help to reduce barriers in the long run and in turn may enhance the sector. This study will be a supportive resource to any reader interested in identifying women's leadership qualities to manage the higher education sector.

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# Grounded theory as an appropriate methodology for leadership research in construction

Shamas-ur-Rehman Toor

Department of Building, School of Design and Environment, National University of Singapore  
(email: [shamas@nus.edu.sg](mailto:shamas@nus.edu.sg))

George Ofori

Department of Building, School of Design and Environment, National University of Singapore  
(email: [bdgofori@nus.edu.sg](mailto:bdgofori@nus.edu.sg))

## Abstract

Leadership research in the construction industry has been dominated by positivist methodologies resulting in a much larger proportion of quantitative studies than qualitative approaches. Thus, the richer interpretations which could be possible through the latter are not realised. With growing research focus on leadership in construction, it is pertinent for studies to utilize the grounded theory approach to uncover the basic social processes that drive the leadership phenomenon in construction. Research in the mainstream social sciences has recognized the vital benefits that the grounded theory approach offers. There is dearth of grounded theory application in the extant body of knowledge on leadership in construction. A case is presented here to advocate the strengths of grounded theory and the potential benefits it can offer to research on leadership in the construction industry.

**Keywords:** Leadership Research, Grounded Theory Methodology, Construction Industry

## 1. Background

The field of leadership research has changed considerably in how one thinks about, studies, and defines leadership [1,2]. This is mainly because of greater optimism about the field and greater diversity in the methodological approaches being employed by the researchers to study leadership [1]. Bryman [1] further notes the factors that have contributed to this increased optimism and greater methodological diversity, including: improved measurement and analytical methods; greater use of meta-analysis for developing systematic reviews; the surge of interest in transformational leadership and charismatic leadership; more and better cross-cultural studies; and greater diversity in the types of leadership and organizational contexts that became the focus of attention. However, many other researchers have argued that leadership remains a difficult phenomenon to capture and measure.

Research on leadership in construction has particularly been restricted to the use of positivist or quantitative methodologies. Very few studies have utilized qualitative methods to analyze the nature of leadership in the industry. This is ironical. Many have recently argued that leadership must be regarded as a social process [1-6]. Similarly, scholars have argued that construction is a social system in which people are the principal actors [7]. In order to uncover the dynamics of leadership and complex details of the social processes that take place among people in construction, there should be increased use of analyses suitable for studying social processes. This paper underlines the need for the application of more qualitative methodologies to study leadership in the construction industry. It