

How to overcome the lack of senior woman in higher education

 By [Pauline Machika](#)

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The traditional place of woman in higher education was in the role of teacher or secretary. With greater access to higher education over the past few decades, there has been a rise of the senior woman. The rise though, has not created a strong enough impact as there still remains a significant and visible gender inequality gap at higher education institutions. This is largely because of a continuation of traditional norms such as the conviction that management must be males.



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In a 2007, it was found that three of the 23 Vice-Chancellors (13%) and five of the 23 Registrars (21%) are women. Women also comprised 21% of the Deputy Vice-Chancellors, while another 21% were Executive Directors. Although women constitute over 50% of the higher education workforce in South Africa they are still under represented (HERS-SA, 2007). In other countries such as India, 44% of 12 million higher education students are women - yet only 3% of vice-chancellors are women. By comparison, 14% of UK vice-chancellors are women and in Sweden, 43% of heads of universities are women. In all six South Asian countries the share of women in positions of authority and responsibility in higher education is shockingly low. New research by the Economist Intelligence Unit, commissioned by the British Council, has found that while there has been a dramatic rise in the number of female students enrolled in South Asia's universities, this has not been matched by an increase in women occupying senior leadership roles in the sector. Research conducted internationally indicates that the women and men in higher education experiences higher education differently.

The experience of senior women in academy is often a journey of construction and negotiation of identities. They note the diverse pathways to senior management taken by women executives and their atypical career patterns when compared with men. Significant issues include discrimination, and unequal power relations encountered which mediate against women's opportunities for promotion. Factors like these contribute to women's reluctance to apply for senior positions. It can be concluded that overcoming this reluctance is a significant problem for universities in shifting male dominated management roles. Without understanding the phenomenon from a senior women perspective, executive managements might not know how to ensure growth and development so that more women can apply for senior positions in higher education.

Challenges facing women entering into senior positions

Challenges facing women in entering into senior positions in higher education are amongst many namely social and institutional expectations that they cannot lead; the need to put family responsibilities first; career breaks taken for child-raising that coincide with crucial periods for establishing careers in research; and not enjoying the same freedom to travel as men.

Since the turn of the millennium, South African higher education institutions have experienced a number of senior women being appointed to executive management positions. The appointments of women like Professor Irene Moutlana as Vice Chancellor of VUT and Prof Ogude as Vice Chancellor at TUT has encouraged younger women to establish a trend forward. This tactical approach at the upper echelons of the hierarchy though has not cascaded down to with the bulk of management positions still being secured by men. This scenario resembles a "nowist culture" and a "hurried culture", that is, we place more importance on brand-new, high-impact events and strategies than on those which require exploration.

To ensure the growth and development of woman in higher education, a more strategic approach is needed. This certain approach would be reliant on systematic institutional innovation which would impact how the process through which a woman's work identity is formed. Factors that influence professional career development interact with one another are mainly personal characteristics, socio-economics factors, physical and mental abilities and chance factors as a result of certain events occurring which we have no control over. By focusing on appropriate professional career development will enable universities as organisations to move beyond a dependence on the lightning-strike of appointments at the vice chancellor or deputy vice chancellor level. This process of systematic innovation and exploration in professional career development at an institutional, faculty and departmental level will create a more constant and dependable flow of women entering senior management positions and will ensure the emergence of an enabling culture.

Higher Education institutions need to communicate that their organisations are committed to supporting the appointment of senior women at a senior management level by beginning with building a culture that genuinely supports managed and repeatable processes in professional career development at an institutional, faculty and departmental levels. The creation of a culture that is supportive of continuous professional career development underlies the phenomenon of ensuring growth and development so that more women can enter senior positions in higher education. An enabling culture helps within a university organisation begins to define the problems or opportunities for women and in particular for senior women. By understanding the phenomenon from a senior women perspective, executive managements at universities might receive relevant answers to questions like, where is growth and development needed?, What are the key problems that need to be solved? What new opportunities are emerging through professional career development?

By overcoming the challenges, women need to make connections with other women. Competing expectations and anticipation about women leaders from both male and female colleagues can create leadership as an almost untenable space for women in senior positions. It is up to universities to create an enabling culture for women that goes beyond embedded cultures in structures, gender and social class at an institutional, faculty and departmental levels. Certain myths concerning senior women should be shattered; one in particular is when a senior woman talks the language of men in support of managerialism. These senior women can open themselves up for rebuke and criticism from men and women colleagues because they are not operating in gendered ways.

Essential to the exploration of understanding how the growth and development of senior women should unfold is understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of a senior women. It's through this exploration that the personal identity coalesces, is shaped and reshaped across the different communities of practice within a particular university.

The experiences of senior women in higher education cannot be ignored as they bring a unique contribution which can maximise a university in terms of its strategic positioning. The input from senior women can help develop understanding of how strategically growth and development can be created in higher education for senior women through professional career development and an enabling culture.

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