Enabling and empowering women in leadership in South African universities – Assessing needs and designing a response

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Abstract
Gender equity and women's access to senior leadership and management positions in universities are a major challenge not only in South Africa but on the African continent, too. For women to take up senior leadership roles more potently, it is essential that they not only cope with and compete in patriarchal systems but more so, are equipped to change patriarchal hegemony and shift the management discourse and culture to a pluralistic leadership culture where trans-formational leadership becomes the norm and praxis. This paper examines a needs analysis for leadership and professional development competencies of women in senior leadership positions in South African higher education and presents the discussion on these findings, based on the data collected from 74 participants. The conclusion reveals the participants' enthusiasm for personal leadership development as well as their readiness for impacting their leadership contexts. These findings, in turn, shape the content development of the Women in Leadership programme, designed by Higher Education Leadership and Management under the auspices of Universities South Africa.

Introduction

During the past two decades the world of higher education has changed dramatically, which has had significant implications for its governance, leadership and management, particularly at senior management level (Gmelch and Buller, 2015; Greicar, 2009; Seale and Cross, 2017). Change has impacted different groups differently. In the increasing performative higher education context of 'gender-blind, market-driven, and performative culture of the neoliberal academe' women face unique challenges in the higher education spaces in general and in the leadership context in particular (Göktürk and Tülübas, 2020; Harris, 2020; HET, 2019).

South African higher education is in transition and grappling with major challenges arising from global and local development imperatives. Some authors suggest that it has a leadership crisis and requires a new kind of leadership and management that is attuned to transformation, pluralism on the one hand and performativity and efficiency on the other (HET, 2019; Seale and FitzGerald, 2016).

A critical role in addressing the current challenges is played by women leaders. Gender equity and women's access to senior leadership and management positions in universities is a major challenge not only in South Africa but on the African continent, too (Harris, 2020; HET, 2019; Odhiambo, 2011). For women to take up senior leadership roles more potently, it is essential that women not only cope with and compete in patriarchal systems but more so, that women leaders are equipped to change patriarchal hegemony and shift management discourse and culture to a pluralistic leadership culture where transformational leadership becomes the norm while delivering on the set agenda and goals.

This paper examines a needs analysis for leadership and professional development competencies of women in

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senior leadership positions in South African higher education and presents the discussion on these findings, based on the data collected from 74 women participants.

Based on the findings of the training and development needs analysis of these women leaders, it is apparent that an emergent requirement includes new discourses and practices based on pluralist management and transformative leadership styles; as well as a focus on enhancing management competencies to advance efficiencies and delivery.

Power and higher education in South Africa

Institutional culture 'denotes the totality of regimes of praxes within universities that normalise the productions and distributions of patterns, of recognitions and misrecognitions according to norms that construct subjectivities, without these norms themselves being subjected to scrutiny' (Keet, in Fish, 2019). According to Keet (in Fish, 2019) these subjectivities and norms are 'micro arrangements within a university space' that have, over time, become acceptable and immovable ways of doing things within the university. These norms 'are patterns of recognitions and patterns of misrecognitions, or inclusions and exclusions that exist within the university' (Fish, 2019: 31) and consolidate existing power while keeping others from accessing that power. Particularly minorities and women (often being a small minority) 'experience their identities as misaligned with hegemonic culture' (HET, 2019: 31).

This paper explores these micro arrangements, invisible and covert, nebulous and veiled, and how women leaders experience these, possibly inadvertently reproduce them, and on the basis of this experience identify empowerment needs. Some of these institutional cultures are experienced explicitly as 'overt and covert racism, sexism and patriarchy in universities' as was recently stated in a national report on the advancement of academics in South African Universities (HET, 2019: 31).

At least two questions emerge in the needs analysis around leadership needs of women leaders in this paper, one: are there needs around how to engage the culture, challenge it and change it, (i.e., how to advance pluralism and transformation so as to counter patriarchal hegemony); and two: are there needs around developing competencies which advance efficiency and delivery as leaders in the current university context in South Africa.

Women leaders in higher education

According to Spangsdorf (2016), only 18% of the top 200 universities globally were led by women in 2017. In the USA, the American Council Education[1] reports that women comprised 30% of college presidents in 2016 and in the UK 21% of heads of institutions are women, and in South Africa, only 15% of Universities were led by women in 2017 (Huang et al., 2019; Osho, 2018). While these numbers reflect an increase over the past decade, there is concern 'about the overall trend in low gender representation at top university positions', or as Johnson (2017: 6) described it as 'the higher the fewer' (Harris, 2020; HET, 2019; Metcalf, 2018).

As these statistics suggest, the experiences of women academic leaders in South Africa remain a challenge around access to top leadership positions and gender inequality in the professional and professorial promotion areas. Patriarchy and male dominated institutional hierarchies and networks as well as 'alienating and exclusionary institutional cultures and practices' (HET, 2019: 31) are still prevalent in South Africa which continue to pose intractable challenges to woman leadership advancement (HET, 2019; Mouton and Wildschut, 2015).

Training and development opportunities for women leaders

To address these gender inequities, the need for the advancement of women leaders in universities is becoming a focal point for many global higher education systems. In the United States for example, the American Council on Education Women's Network provides a platform for women interested in pursuing leadership opportunities in higher education. Responding to this need in the United Kingdom, Advance Higher Education coordinates a Women's Leadership in Higher Education Programme, and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) has a dedicated Gender Programme and Universities Australia operates an Executive Women Group.

While these efforts make some advances in those parts of the world, in Africa, there has not been a specific focus on women leaders, although there have been two decades of general higher education leadership development (Mouton and Wildschut, 2015). Already in the early 2000s UNESCO supported the Association of African Universities (AAU) with a general leadership development course (LEDEV) and a general management development course (MADEV) which was followed by Higher Education South Africa's Higher Education Leadership and Management course (HELM) and the Southern African Regional Universities Association's (SARUA) Governance, Leadership and Management Programme (Mouton and Wildschut, 2015). These training and development opportunities aim to advance senior management in general without a specific focus on women in leadership.

In South Africa, the notion of university leadership has only recently expanded to include a wider understanding including Head of Academic Departments, Head of Academic School, Deans, and Deputies as well as Administrative Leadership, such as Registrars' functions and Faculty Managers. Their need for a 'structural and systematic training development programme' is acute (Mouton and Wildschut, 2015: 8). The need is for both the management development and leadership development opportunities (Mouton and Wildschut, 2015) not only in the academe but as well as in the administration of universities.

It is for these reasons of advancing management (with emphasis on performativity and efficiency) and leadership (with focus on pluralism and transformation)

that Universities South Africa (USAf, formerly known as Higher Education South Africa (HESA), a membership organisation representing all 26 of South Africa's public universities) developed and implemented its Higher Educational Leadership and Management (HELM) programme. The aim of HELM is to advance, in specific, women leaders and has thus developed a specific Women in Leadership (WiL) programme to enable, empower and advance women leadership. This Women in Leadership programme is mandated to address leadership issues focusing on women leadership advancement, efficiencies in the system, but also, and more specifically to address equity, access to the executive suite and transformation issues, which appear to be advancing sluggishly.

The Women in Leadership programme – A response to the need

The Women in Leadership (WiL) programme, a key component of HELM, is focused on advancing women to lead change in a complex higher education context, where balancing contesting demands, engaging with virulent student and public voices and synthesising global and local imperatives in sustainable ways, are viewed as opportunities to shape the higher education context into an environment in which everyone, and especially women leaders, can thrive (Bolden et al., 2015; HELM, 2020). The fundamental premise for WiL is developing competent, effective leaders who impact on and function in a complex, changing and challenging higher education context that values pluralism and transforms the South African higher education landscape.

The goals of the WiL is to equip women leaders to impact the leadership context in transformative ways, transforming themselves, the context and the fellow leaders to lead in a pluralist, collaborative way, embracing sustainable development goals which advance shared objectives. Leadership is viewed as a transformative processes, directed not only at the context and institutional culture, but also at the team that is being led and the individual leader herself.

The conceptual shift is from empowering women to *cope in* a working world where women may represent a minority, *towards* the empowerment of women as transformational leaders of diverse teams *who shape* the very context within which they seek to thrive, thus advancing transformation of a sytem. The focus is on empowering women to be transformational leaders who shape environments in which diversity, innovation and excellence thrive, in their universities and within their public spaces (Nhamo and Mjimba, 2020). The main contention here is that leadership development for women academic leaders requires a response to the unique higher education setting in South Africa, focusing on shared transformative leadership as well as to efficiently advancing the mission and goals of higher education.

Research method, participants and analysis

Between 2018 and 2019, HELM held a series of training and development programmes directed at Deans, Deputy Deans, Head of Academic Departments and Head of Academic Schools, and conducted needs analysis among the attendees via a questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions, using self-report answers. The aim was to understand the perception of skills considered already in place and the participants' need for further development. One such survey was specifically aimed at understanding women's experience of their leadership journey and asked a number of closed and open-ended questions trying to get to the specifics of the training needs for women in leadership in South African higher education.

The survey

The web-based survey was conducted to record a wide range of data, like gender, years in the leadership position and numerous other descriptive measures. The information captured allowed for a more detailed Training Needs Analysis (TNA) and mapping it to the particular group of women leaders. This was especially necessary given the paucity of research into women leaders in South African higher education and primarily because part of HELM's mandate and commitment is to strengthen the Women in Leadership (WiL) programme. The survey focused on (1) skills considered already in place, and (2) further development needs.

The questions were open-ended and asked the participant to either list certain items, themes or key terms, and then to grade these using 1-5, with 5 being the most important. For open ended questions the text was thematically analysed to extract key themes.

The participants

In total there were 74 women participants over the course of the 2018 and 2019 training programmes who participated in the survey. Of the 74 participants, the vast majority (87%) were aged between 40 and 60 and came from all of the three institutional types that exist in South Africa (46% from Traditional Universities, 39% from Comprehensive and 15% from Universities of Technology). The attendance from the Universities of Technology is under-represented which may reflect the priorities of these institutions or/and that the HELM programme is not reaching that specific kind of institution in its communication or recruitment. When asked about the academic degrees of the participants, 81% had PhD degrees and of the remaining 19%, all had achieved Masters degrees. This is not a reflection of the overall academic sector's degree composition where in 2017 only 46% of the full-time academic teaching and research staff had a PhD (HET, 2019). Their discipline fields were diverse covering 61 disciplines from Nursing to Strategic Management.

Table 1. HELM Questionnaire.

No.	Question	Responses
1	Your age	• Under 40 • 41-50 • 51-60 • Over 60
2	Your university type	• Traditional university • University of technology • Comprehensive university
3	What is your current leadership/management role?	• Dean • Deputy/assistant Dean • Head of School • Head of Academic Department • Other (please specify)
4	How many years have you been in your current position?	• Less than 1 year • At least 1 year but less than 3 years • At least 3 years but less than 5 years • At least 5 years but less than 10 years • 10 years or more
5	What is your highest qualification?	
6	What is your disciplinary or subject area?	
7	Do you intend pursuing a career in academic leadership and management and, if so, what post are you likely to apply for should the opportunity arise in the next 5 years?	• Deputy Vice Chancellor • Dean • Deputy/Assistant Dean • Head of School • Other (please specify)
8	How important do you believe are each of the following skills and knowledge in your current role?	a. Understanding the HE context, policy and regulatory environment b. Understanding university strategic and operational planning c. Understanding academic leadership and management d. Understanding university funding and budgeting e. Understanding change management f. Understanding people management g. Being able to manage my work and life balance effectively h. Being able to manage my own leadership/professional development i. Being able to manage my team's leadership/professional development j. Being able to engage and communicate with diverse internal and external groups k. Having adequate administrative and resource management skills for my current position l. Other (please specify)
9	In your experience, how effective has participation in each of the following activities been in developing your capabilities as a leader and manager in the University?	a. Participating in HE leadership/management workshops, seminars and conferences b. Accessing leadership/management information in books, articles and on the web c. Participating in a leadership/management development event offered by your University d. Participating in a leadership/management development event offered by an external service provider or agency e. Study of 'real-life' workplace problems through simulations or case studies f. Participating in peer networks in your University g. Participating in peer networks beyond your University h. Informal conversations with colleagues and others outside of your University

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

No.	Question	Responses
		i. Participating in an annual performance management review
		j. Participating in formal mentorship/coaching programmes
		k. Being involved in informal mentorship/coaching opportunities internally and externally
		l. Learning on the job
		m. University induction and on boarding programmes
		n. Participating in customised leadership/management development programmes
		o. Undertaking site visits or study tours to other Universities/ Organisations
		p. Other (please specify)
10	Now that you have attended both Parts 1 and 2 of the Foundations Programme, do you feel that there are any additional areas that you would like further development in for your current role?	
11	If you answered 'Yes' to Question 10 above, please list up to three leadership/management areas you would like to receive further development for in your current role.	
12	In your view, what are the 3 main challenges facing women academic leaders in terms of professional development and advancement?	
13	How could these challenges be addressed through a Women in Leadership development programme?	
14	If given the opportunity, would you participate in a HELM Women in Leadership development programme?	
15	Are there any comments or issues you would like to add?	

Most of the participants (60 participants or 81%) were currently heads of academic departments or heads of academic schools, with 10 participants (13,5%) at assistant dean, vice dean or dean levels, and 4 had senior academic posts (5,5%). This demographic spread of women in leadership positions was also found in another study (Seale and Cross, 2017) which found that woman 'peak' at the head of department level (54% of head of department and head of schools in universities) were woman in South African universities (Seale and Cross, 2017).

Results and discussion

Required skills and competencies

The participants were asked to grade a given series of skills and competencies as to their perceived importance for them to fulfil their current leadership role. There were 11 skills and competencies offered and none of the participants scored any of these below 4. This is most noteworthy in that it suggests that the participants considered all skills and competencies as important to their role.

The skills and competencies can be largely broken down into two categories. The first category encompasses those scoring under 4.7 and generally referred to issues that concern the broader, administrative and managerial role and strategic functioning within the university. Items like 'understanding university funding and budgeting' registered 4.59 as average. Another such example is 'having

adequate administrative and resource management skills for my current position', which scored 4.63 as average.

In the second category, the issues that were graded above 4,7 and mattered most to the participants focused on understanding the system and context in which they functioned and almost as importantly, understanding the people with whom they worked. The importance placed on understanding academic leadership and people management may reflect higher emotional intelligence but more likely points to the crucial need to understand the implicit rules of engagement within the institution, especially when these are governed implicitly and historically by a patriarchal system (HET, 2019; Keet, 2015). The understanding the sub-economies that exist beneath the surface of a university's culture is imperative to navigating and thus excelling and thriving within its system of patriarchal hierarchy, power and authority (Keet, 2015).

Regarding the item on 'being able to manage my own leadership/professional development' and 'being able to manage my team's leadership/professional development' the second was graded as in slightly more important (4,76 and 4,77 graded average, respectively). This grading illustrates the respondent's focus on the team's advancement above her own advancement. This might be a reflection of a gendered internalised stereotype of the 'selfless giver' as alluded to by Stead and Elliott (2009: 53). This may also be a contributing factor to why women leaders advance more slowly and tend to occupy the head of department or head of academic school level, in that there
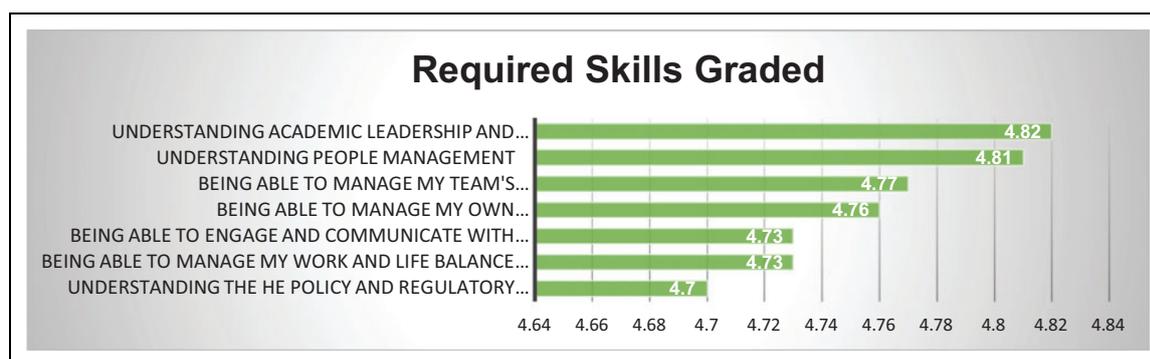
Figure 1. Highest graded required skills and competencies. (HELM 2020)

is a perception of the importance of the team's advancement with and above her own advancement. In other words, bringing a team along and focusing on the collective good may not be accelerating personal promotion on the management trajectory (Bolden et al., 2015). If indeed there is validity to this argument, then the criteria which accelerate or constrain the management advancement require revisions if the ideals of collective advancement, a corner stone of transformational leadership, are to be promoted.

The fifth most important skill and competence was identified as communicating with diverse groups (4,73 graded average), revealing the participants' appreciation of pluralism and transformation. This reveals the participants' readiness for transformative leadership and promotion of pluralism, which is displayed this this high ranking of this item (4,73).

It is frequently found that women, more readily than men, grade the work-life balance as an important skill and competency (Stead and Elliott, 2009; Verniers et al., 2016). Here again it might be a gendered internalised stereotype that women perceive the demands of family, care and health more acutely than their male peers (Stead and Elliott, 2009; Verniers et al., 2016). Particularly in a traditional society, such as South Africa, the gender roles put, more obviously, a burden on women (perceived or explicit), and so also on women leaders in academia (Harris, 2020). Experiencing and responding to the needs of family, perhaps children and ageing parents, has implications for research time and completing additional management duties, curbing promotions opportunities, hence the expressed high-grade ranking for the 'skill' to balance these. Interesting here, it is expressed as a personal 'skill' which needs to be personally mastered, rather than viewing the gendered burden as a societal and institutional issue, again reflecting deep gendered internalised assumptions about gender roles (Harris, 2020).

Capacity development avenues

The next part of the survey attempted to rank 15 different activities that would have an impact on university leaders and managers in the development of their own capabilities. In this case, 'learning on the job' and 'participating in the leadership/management workshops' scored highest. These

findings suggest that informal, hands on capacity development with like-minded peers both inside and external to the university are highly valued.

The picture that emerges here is that informal conversations with colleagues are widely held as the most popular form of acquiring new leadership knowledge, together with learning on the job. The second most important avenue for acquiring leadership competencies appears to by via formal leadership seminars and conferences. Both these responses suggest an assumption that 'learning to lead' and decoding the leadership discourse *within* the system can be done informally from colleagues and formally via leadership events.

Further training and development

Working from the perspective that all the participants had attended HELM's leadership and management development programmes, it was asked what kinds of courses they thought would be most beneficial to their leadership futures. The responses were of two categories, one: focusing on advancing efficiency and delivery, and two: advancing people management, staff development and change management, revealing a clear focus on teams and transformation.

Unsurprisingly, given that the majority of participants are heads of school and departments, financial planning and the ability to budget, features predominantly. Perhaps more interestingly, is the fact that the majority of the other responses all deal with people management and development. This may be accounted for by Stead and Elliott's (2009) argument that women tend to have internalised stereotypes of being people focused. However, an alternative interpretation may be that woman in the context of a predominantly male leadership structure need to focus and understand the human psychology and patterns of power relations that predominates in a patriarchy so as to penetrate this, cope with and ultimately thrive in this context.

The next area of focus attempted to flesh out the above findings and give participants an opportunity to respond in a more granular and precise fashion. Again, there are two kinds of trends which manifest here.
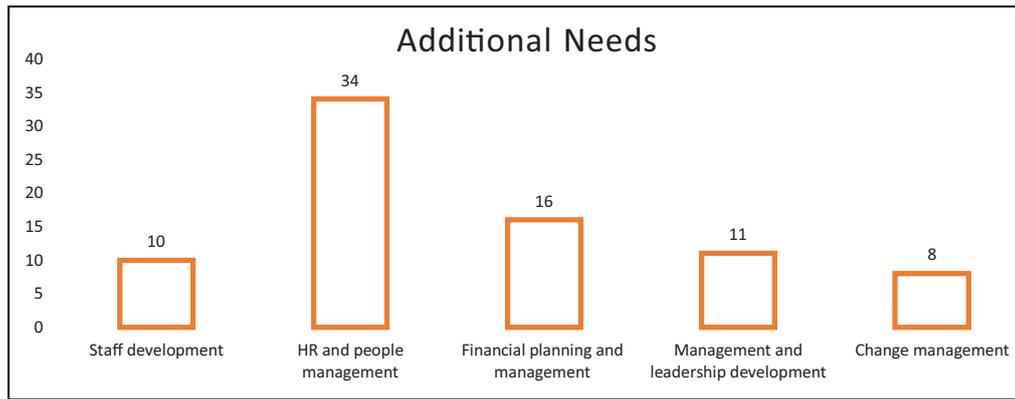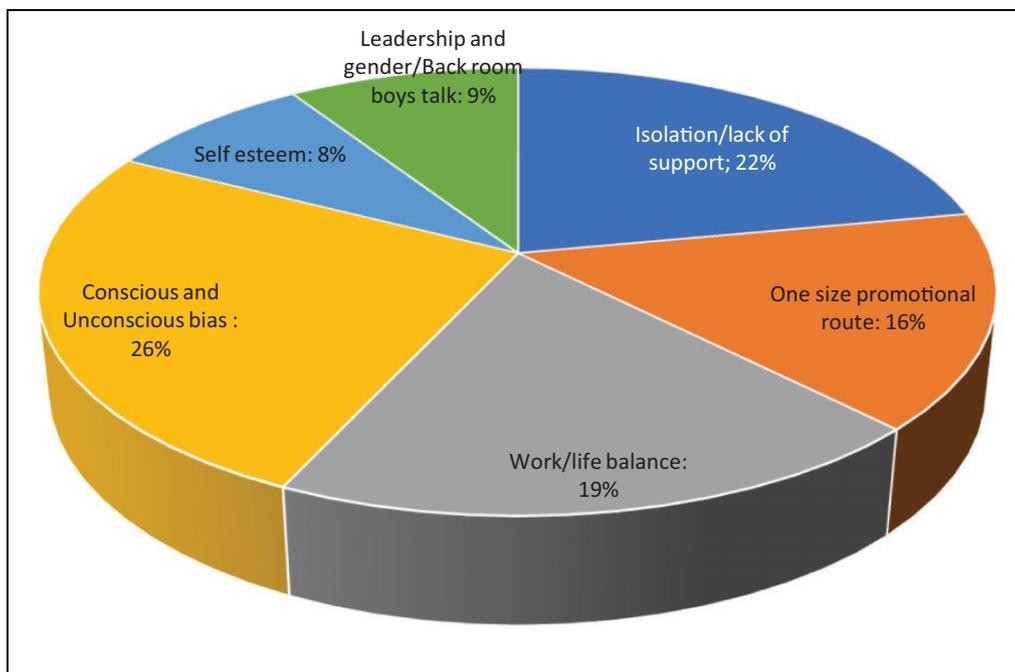
Figure 2. Additional needs. (HELM 2020)

Figure 3. Challenges faced by women in higher education leadership. (HELM 2020)

Challenges faced by women leaders

When asked to respond to the perceived challenges facing women in the higher education sector, much of the previous results come into sharp relief. This question was open-ended and allowed participants to discuss and describe the three major challenges facing woman in their university experiences. These themes were then categorised and numbered. This means that some categories blur and overlap. Leadership and gender have much in common with conscious and unconscious bias and internalised stereotypes (Stead and Elliott, 2009; Verniers et al, 2016), specifically relating to participants' relation to fellow and superior predominantly male leaders within the university. The fact that, collectively, 35% of women leaders reportedly face ongoing gender bias is disturbing, if expected, but it is rendered more disconcerting in the face of the perceived isolation and perceived lack of support

(24,22%). Themes of isolation and lack of support also have a negative impact on self-esteem (9,8%) (as would many other factors). The emerging themes here repeatedly speak to an experience of having a 'muted, drowned out voice', an 'expectation to prove oneself immediately, especially when a man has previously been in charge' and an 'inherent perfectionism' where women feel there is no room for mistakes or failure. There appeared a 'lack of self-esteem', 'submissiveness' and an 'inferiority complex' among these women leaders. This may be as a result of real or perceived, externally caused or internally perpetuated perceptions of the self in the context and role of leadership. The recently released research on black women academics' experience in South African Universities echoes these findings and suggests that explicit racism and sexism pose insurmountable barriers to the advancement of particularly black women leaders in the Higher Education context in South Africa (HET, 2019).
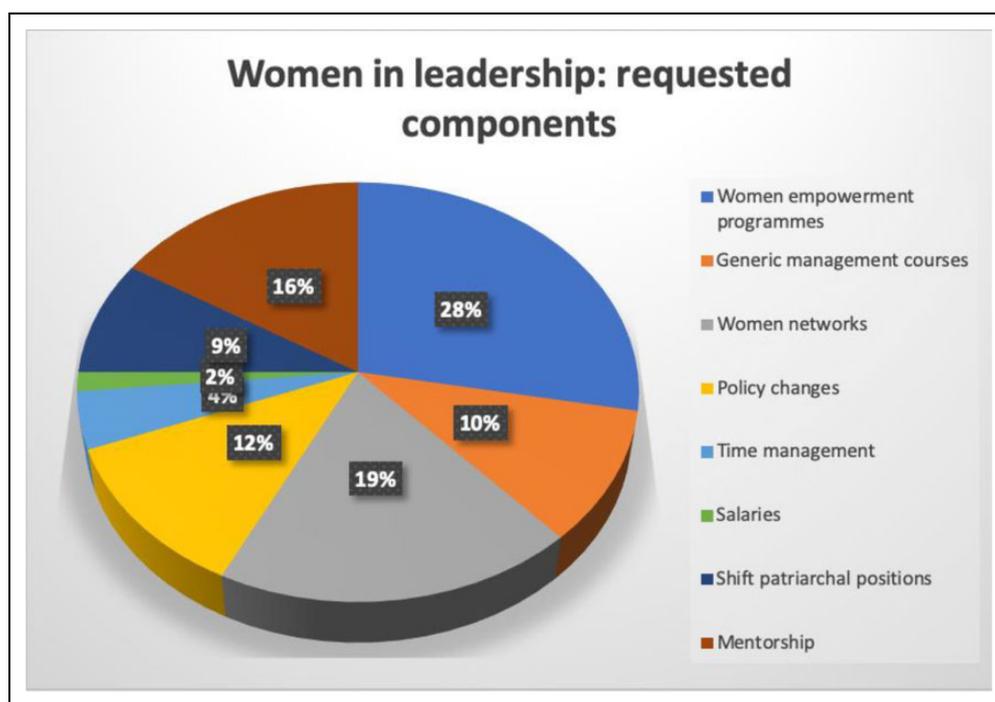
Figure 4. Requests for further training and development. (HELM 2020)

Building training and development responses to perceived needs

The question on the need for further leadership development opportunities was answered positively by 98,41% of the respondents and the follow up questions turned to what kind of interventions would the participants think most valuable.

The most mentioned need was for a women's 'empowerment programme', the establishment of an ongoing supportive network for women and the initiation of a mentorship programme from current and past women leaders to share experiences and strategies for thriving in the university sector.

The women's empowerment programmes would be effective in dealing with the unconscious and conscious bias and internalised stereotypes that prevail. The desire for generic management courses, and a focus on education policy and procedures accounted for the general need to gain a more textured understanding of current higher education leadership and management practices.

The establishment of a women's network would address the sense of isolation and loneliness that women leaders experience. This would include training on specific topics and would include ongoing connectivity and the development of a community of practice.

Conclusion

The literature on and our survey of women's leadership experiences in South African universities reveal many interesting, but not surprising aspects. Overall, women experience a gendered context in which they see themselves as and are being at a disadvantage from a leadership and management perspective. What has become clear is that there are complex interrelationships between the challenges that women face in the higher education context with its implicit patriarchal management cultures and the internalised and/or explicit ascription of gender roles (HET, 2019).

There is a definite need to address these challenges and the South African Higher Education Leadership and Management programme (HELM) is well placed to engage and mitigate these challenges. The needs analysis mapped the challenges across the predominantly patriarchal 'economies' of the institutional cultures and revealed that women leaders 1) require advancement to promote pluralism and transformation and that women leaders have a particular readiness for this, and 2) require concrete skills to promote management competencies to advance efficiencies and the delivery of set goals so as to advance in the existing systems.

The unconscious and conscious gender discrimination with its male sub-economies has historically been built into the very way the university is structured. To counter this, the development of a Women in Leadership Programme that contains both strategies to address gender asymmetries as well as generic management and leadership skills, could offer women leaders broad and gender specific knowledge to counteract existing bias, recognise their role within it and lead the context towards a gender-fair transformative leadership culture.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

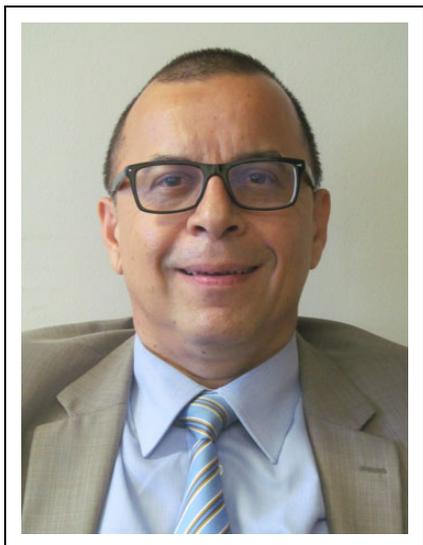## Note

1. See http://www.aceacps.org/women-presidents/.

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