

Leadership in Higher Education: Women's Mentorship and Leadership Styles

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Abstract: Women's leadership across industries worldwide continues to be promoted by governments, companies, and organizations alike. This paper presents preliminary results from a broader qualitative research on women in leadership positions in higher education institutions (HEI), government positions, and companies related to higher education (HE) worldwide. This paper presents the views of women in leadership roles in HEI (including department, institution, board of directors, among others) and related organizations (such as consultancies, embassies) on 1) the mentorship they have received (if any) from their role models, and 2) which leadership styles they perceive to practice in their daily activities in their current role. Through semi-structured interviews, we gathered information about participants' views, practices, and leadership styles. The participants included women from diverse nationalities, ages, socioeconomic, cultural, and academic backgrounds, all of whom currently hold leadership roles in or related to higher education. The interviews were recorded, videotaped, subsequently transcribed, and then coded using MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software. Results indicated that most participants had received mentorship from previous leaders such as thesis advisors, university deans, faculty heads, or colleagues in similar positions. Participants in the study also cited parents and spouses as role models and mentors influencing their personal and professional decisions. They reported learning qualities such as innovation, creativity, resilience, and soft skills from their mentors. Regarding their leadership styles, most women did not identify with a specific style but rather described some dynamics and approaches they employ in their current leadership roles. Mentorship in the higher education field can support women in the early stages of their careers, help develop their leadership styles, and encourage them to strive for such positions. The study concludes that targeted mentorship programs for women should be established and promoted to incorporate broader perspectives at the highest levels of decision-making in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Educational innovation, Female leadership, Higher education, Leadership, Mentorship

1. Introduction

Comprehending the role mentorship plays in women's leadership positions in higher education, and their adopted dynamics and leadership styles, can offer a roadmap for others who are contemplating pursuing similar paths in their careers. Today, most leadership positions worldwide are held by men in government, corporate, and in most sectors of society (UN Women, 2025). By having women in decision-making roles, industries will have different perspectives that can add to problem-solving discussions of pressing issues, as well as contribute to production and economic growth (Kyambade, M. *et al.* (2024). While women in leadership roles are steadily rising, the United Nations (UN) reports that it will take an estimated 130 years for the gender gap to close in executive government positions (UN Women, 2025).

In higher education, leadership has historically been represented by men, including deans, department heads, and other roles. According to the QS World University Rankings of 2025, only 29% of the top 100 universities were led by women (Cornish, 2025). In turn, work policies, career growth within the institution, and male perspectives have overlooked women's voices, experiences, and the different stages of their lives, and how these may affect their professional development or stagnation (AEEN, 2024; Llorens et al., 2021; Padavic, Ely & Reid, 2020).

Nonetheless, few studies focus on the mentorship, if any, that female leaders in higher education have received, providing us with a roadmap to study their experiences in their professional journey. With this in mind, this study was guided by the following research questions: 1) Did they receive mentorship from their role models/mentors? and 2) which leadership style they perceived to practice in their current role?.

2. Mentorship as a Tool for Women's Leadership Development

Mentorship is widely recognized as an effective tool for providing a roadmap for transitioning roles in an institution. Mentorship alludes to “[being] a dynamic and transformative relationship which affects both parties” (McIlongo & Strydom, 2021). However, if there is a lack of female representation in these positions in HE organizations, there can also be a lack of mentorship opportunities for women, and by women (Okonedo, 2024).

Choosing to pursue leadership positions in one’s career requires role models, in addition to mentorship. Stefani (2024) noted, “fewer studies have examined the impact of role models and perceived support from parents and peers on career persistence” (p. 2). In the case of women, there are even fewer role models in leadership in higher education who can work as mentors for other women. Bozeman & Feeney’s (2009) mentorship model understands this process as a training and adaptation route where individuals can learn and acquire hands-on experience for leadership positions. Their model focuses on women’s mentorship and how they can attain these roles within organizations.

According to Bhatti (2021), internationally, there has been a significant increase in women's participation in leadership roles within universities, mainly at lower and mid-level positions. However, progress remains slow for women in senior leadership. In the workforce, women are typically hired based on their professional achievements, whereas men are recruited for their potential. Despite this, female academics are less likely to secure positions at HEI with a strong research focus and often earn lower salaries.

Mentoring has been part of educational systems since the early 20th century. Educational research shows that mentoring programs lead to positive results for students, faculty, and administrators (Nkrumah, 2022). Access to collaborative and mentoring networks is essential for advancing women leaders in universities. These networks increase women’s visibility in traditionally male-dominated academic structures and help promote their advancement to senior leadership roles (Bhatti, 2021).

3. Leadership Styles

To lead is to guide, listen, provide safe environments where individuals can express their opinions without fear or judgment, and encourage growth and development. When it comes to leadership in higher education, the traditional leadership styles have been commonly practiced: democratic, laissez-faire, transformational, and even bureaucratic. For women, leadership in the beginning meant being included in decision-making; therefore, leadership style was highly structured and motivated by strictness (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023).

Leadership can be defined as “the accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistants” (Prentice, 1961, p. 102). Today, leaders should consider other aspects of their organizations to be effective players. In HE, transformational leadership stands out as being “one of the most widely studied and applied styles(...)”. Meta-analytic findings also have proved that transformational leadership impacts greater in organizations when it is controlled by contextual factors (Abbas & Ali, 2023; Garzón-Lasso, et al., 2024; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Transformational leaders [create] a shared vision, fostering (...) purpose, and encouraging innovation. [They] focus on developing their staff’s potential, providing them with growth opportunities, and recognizing their achievements” (Tan, 2025, p.2). Leadership styles are key drivers of organizational effectiveness, and in higher education are no exception. The team, the organization, the attitudes, and the experience are several aspects that come into play when choosing a leadership style that is adequate for higher education. As Tan mentioned (2025), “leadership styles have a profound impact on leadership effectiveness in education. While no single (...) style is universally superior, the most effective educational leaders are those who can adapt their style to the needs of their (...) context” (p. 1).

To understand which leadership styles women have in higher education, and from whom they adopted some of their practices via mentorship, this study focuses on testimonies and their experiences in leadership. This paper presents the views of women in leadership roles (including department, institution, board of directors, among others) and related organizations (such as consultancies, embassies) on 1) the mentorship they have received (if any) from their role models, and 2) which leadership styles they perceive to practice in their daily activities in their current role. Through a qualitative research approach, via semi-structured interviews, the paper presents the findings on the testimonies of a group of women with these positions in higher education.

4. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to analyze the testimonies of women in leadership positions in higher education and if mentorship influenced their leadership. Once permission was granted from the ethics

committee of the Universidad de Sonora, participants were recruited via an invitation email for the study. All females who had leadership roles in higher education institutions, organizations, consultancies, and state-led agencies were invited. The response was expected to be low, since the study looked for women in top universities in the QS World University Ranking (2024), twelve participants accepted and were interviewed.

An invitation to the study was done through convenience, via email directly to their professional email account, by the academic network of some of the authors and of some of the institutional ties and collaborations. The email invitation stated the study's objective, the data collection and analysis process, as well as the possibility of the study being published in conferences and academic journals. Informed consent was obtained by the participants; however, one participant asked not to be audio or video recorded but agreed for the interviewer to take notes of the conversation.

The qualitative approach of the study provided an in-depth look into the experiences, definitions and personal styles of higher education leaders (Gill, 2008). The structured interviews were conducted by one of the authors, who has a doctoral degree in educational innovation and has conducted previous studies on leadership in higher education. The interviews were designed with practice and organizational behavior theories in mind.

The interview script consisted of 9 questions around the topics; however, this number varied depending on whether participants answered some questions with another answer, and if other questions emerged as a result of their answers. They included questions related to their field of work and the people in it, their dynamics, their knowledge capital, leadership definition, and styles. The study and interview design were approved by an expert committee in Social Sciences and Educational Innovation from the University of Sonora (Mexico).

4.1 Participants

Participants in the preliminary results of the study came from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, and from public, private, and state positions. The participants' ages ranged from their mid-thirties to their late sixties. Participants were coded as P1 to P12; their brief profile is presented in Table 1. Some of the participants had previously held leadership roles in other organizations, and others were relatively new in their positions at the time of the interview (one to two years). The study had informants from seven different nationalities, with American and Spanish among the top nationalities. We did not offer any type of incentive for their participation in the study.

Table 1: Profile of participants of the study

Part. #	Nationality	Type of organization	Country
P1	British	University	United Kingdom
P2	American	University	United States of America
P3	Spanish	University	Spain
P4	Brazilian	University	Mexico
P5	Spanish	University	Spain
P6	American	venture capital (vc) firm	United States of America
P7	Australian	Governmental	Australia
P8	American	Consulting firm	United States of America
P9	Mexican	University	Mexico
P10	Scottish	University	United Kingdom
P11	American	Consulting firm	United States of America

Part. #	Nationality	Type of organization	Country
P12	American	University	United Kingdom

4.2 Data Collection

Information was collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted online from November 2023 to February 2025, using the Zoom platform (paid subscription), private meeting rooms, and in-person interviews at Tecnológico de Monterrey's Monterrey Campus, in the northwestern part of Mexico. Interviews were transcribed, and some parts of the participants' answers were eliminated as instructed during some interviews (mostly when mentioning names of people). The duration of the interviews ranged from thirty minutes to an hour and a half; this allowed the interviewer to follow up with more questions during the same.

4.3 Data Analysis

When all interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded to the MAXQDA qualitative software program for organizing themes, categories, and codes of each interview. The coding was done by one of the authors, who holds a PhD in educational innovation and had prior experience with the qualitative software and research involving semi-structured interviews.

The diversity of the participants' cultural backgrounds provided a new outlook on how they view leadership as an act of giving back, and preparing the new leaders by mentoring those in their teams, in cases where it applied. Also, the experiences of taking a step back from academia and government roles provided the participants with a new perspective on owning their years of experience and becoming their own leaders.

5. Results and Discussion

The results showed that some participants mentioned having had role models rather than mentors in their professional careers as leaders. During the analysis of the results, we identified that most of the participants did not mention a specific leadership style in their daily practices. However, the majority of informants noted qualities they carried in their practice from different types of leadership.

5.1 Mentors or Role Models

This paper defined mentorship as the process of guiding others into adopting and transitioning into leadership roles in their professional careers (Bozeman & Feeney, 2009). These preliminary results show the presence of more role models than mentors in the transition of the participants into leadership positions in higher education (HE).

The informants mentioned a sense of service, of diligently acting and delivering results in their leadership positions, rather than having a mentorship to guide them. There were even fewer participants who mentioned having had women as key mentors in their careers. Some participants mentioned role models who continued to inspire them in fulfilling their current leadership position. However, more than mentors, they had role models who did not take to mentoring them but to providing them with their example or experience.

Participant 6 did not mention any specific gender nor a person who had mentored her. She viewed how several people throughout the years had mentored her to achieve her current leadership:

"I think I've been very fortunate and that I have worked with some amazing people in my career and have cultivated mentors along the way. So, just about every job, I've had amazing mentors that I still call and rely on, and ask for help or advice or guidance or whatever" (Participant 6).

This shared belief of having great male and female leaders was reported by others. Participant 9 mentioned that more than a mentor, what has guided her is a vision rather than a person:

"I am very inspired by a mission, by a vision, and a sense of purpose. I had great leaders in my life and of course, I admire them, both male and female, because of specific traits (...). I think motivation has to come from within, and the best motivation is having a purpose that transcends(...). Like I said, I admire other women who do this, and have done this, it is not easy (...) because we want it all (...).

Participant 3 shared how both men and women have influenced her leadership practices and have been a source of mentorship and inspiration. Nonetheless, informants mentioned having had more male mentors than women:

“Female referents, I’ve had only a few. (...) [I had] this [woman as a] boss at [a university], I think she is the only woman I’ve had [as a mentor] in research. My [male] thesis director whom I’ve trained with, (...) I’ve always admired his brilliance, and I have tried to guide myself through that path in the scientific aspect. In the management aspect, my reference is my dean, who has put me in this field, (...) and I admire how he manages things”.

On the other hand, Participant 4 linked mentorship to her current leader in the same organization where she works today. Additionally, Participant 4 talked about how this male mentor guided her, but mainly answered her questions about the role, the decision-making process, the organization, and overall self-development:

“I think that my leader [is my mentor], and not because he is my boss today, but because I was fortunate to have leaders [where I work], who were people from whom I could learn and who were also very generous. My leaders [have] never held back information, knowledge or opportunities; and that is something big and it had a great impact on the type of leader that I aspire to be”.

Other mentors mentioned by the informants were not necessarily from their field but were more of emotional support in the form of parents or spouses/partners. Participant 7 noted that her influence came from her partner: *“I think there have been a lot of people who have influenced particular elements of particular times. If I had to think of someone at particular times, I would say my partner because he’s been consistent throughout the time we’ve been together”.*

Participants enhanced their decision-making skills, creativity, resilience, and soft skills mostly by way of seeing and communicating with their senior leaders, rather than having a training program to become their future leaders. Some participants reported that having the wrong mentors shaped them into the type of leaders they wanted to be; others noted that by being in the same boardrooms as their mentors and their senior leaders, and adopted the practices they admired from them.

The results indicated that, more than having female mentors for their leadership development, participants attributed their leadership styles, dynamics, and practices to role models. Most of the participants mentioned male role models, whether it be due to a lack of female representation in leadership roles, or because they did not take gender as an aspect to consider, but rather skills. These testimonies come to enhance what McIlongo & Strydom (2021) mentioned about women not having enough support to gain knowledge and skills for leadership positions: *“women (...) believe that mentorship plays an important role in their career development; however, women are not always convinced that the mentorship programme will be effectively implemented”* (p. 8).

One finding we did not anticipate was the mention from several participants of how other women in power had made it difficult for them to achieve their own positioning. Informants noted that not only did they not receive mentorship from other women who were already in leadership positions in their organizations or institutions, but that they encountered opposition from them. Participant 10 also shared how some of the negative experiences she had with leaders came from other women: *“I think I sort of feel that women can also be very [mean] towards others (...)”.*

5.2 Leadership Styles

The shared themes of leadership traits of participants were inclusivity and teamwork. Participants of the study did not explicitly say which leadership style they thought they practiced, but rather qualities of different types. Except for one informant, the participants did not label their leadership style in this study. Participant 9 named her leadership style as being transformational:

“I believe in transformational leadership, I think my style is one of trust and open communication, and setting very clear expectations and following through (...)”.

Whether it was due to her position in the institution or that she had previous knowledge of the types of leadership, this participant described several aspects of transformational leadership and gave examples in her everyday role. Similar to previous studies by Abbas & Ali, 2023 and Judge & Piccolo, 2004, Participant 9 understood that she had to inspire motivation, influence positively, and consider each person from her organization to gain the results the institution needed, through a transformational leadership style.

Participants described their leadership style as one that had to change with time, during, and after the lockdown due to COVID-19. This meant not only that the well-being of their team members and organizations was a priority, but they too had to adopt new tools, including being more inclusive. Participant 1 noted the following:

"I(...) feel that leadership has changed a lot. I think positively, and that as we become leaders, we may learn to do things one way and have had to think about that and think about whether the people who we are leading want that anymore".

Other participants mentioned having this sense of inclusivity in their leadership. Participant 2 also described how, during the pandemic until this day, she makes sure to be aware of everyone's well-being:

"I would lead my team in a pandemic as a huddle, (...) I would ask simple questions, such as: how are you? How is your team? Do you need anything from me? (...) And now with a crisis in the Middle East, we have the huddle back, checking in on our mental health; some are struggling. I care about community. I want a strong and inclusive community. There are human resources issues, managing the team, a lot of services, and new moms (postpartum issues)".

This inclusivity that participants mentioned was connected with a sense of teamwork. Participant 11 mentioned that she not only included others in the decision-making process, but also understood that their ideas and points of view were part of coming up with solutions:

"Too many leaders just let people talk. That's not listening. You know, it— it's listening, it's collaborating, visioning, you know, having a— an idea of, okay, I can see where I think we need to go. I'm not sure how to get there".

Participant 3 noted that her leadership style was an autocratic one in the beginning, this due to her previous belief that women in leadership had to "act" like the men. However, experience and time made her style more democratic, which included others in the decision process:

"I believe that what characterizes me as a leader is teamwork. Absolutely, absolutely, I am a person of consensus. I like to discuss all of the decisions, and [me and my team] meet regularly (...). I rarely do anything by myself".

Most of the participants mentioned they led with a leadership style of trust, where teams believe in the leader, and leaders provide growth opportunities and safe environments for the members to discuss and express their ideas. Participant 10 described her leadership as

"I suppose (...), sometimes it's really a difficult balance between. There is a managerial part where you just need to make sure that the work is done in time, that everyone in the team is doing their work. But, I think it's also leaving some wiggle room, especially for the more junior people on the team, to make sure that they have some time to discover for themselves what they want to do in the future".

As Tan (2025) noted, "Leaders who can flexibly adopt elements of various leadership styles based on the context and needs of their teams are more likely to achieve long-term success" (p. 3). Participants considered their leadership style as a mix between inclusive, human-oriented, of trust, and welcoming of letting others participate in the decision-making process.

The study did present limitations, which we made note of. There was a small number of participants who agreed to volunteer in the study; this was due in part to their agendas. The study focused on the higher education sector worldwide; this proved to be daring since the backgrounds and experiences of leaders varied greatly, as well as the education systems where they developed their leadership skills. Some participants were women of color (WOC), the experiences of white and WOC women in leadership positions can vary greatly. For future studies, it is advised to compare such differences in race and education systems. It is also suggested to focus on institutions that have mentorship programs for women for leadership positions in higher education.

6. Conclusions

Examining women's mentorship and leadership practices in higher education helps understand their paths to power and how they lead. Interviews with the participants highlighted the opportunities they gained through hard work, though most did not have mentors during their leadership development. Additionally, as some informants noted, once women attain leadership positions, some may be less welcoming to other women due to fears of competition.

The participants mentioned having role models who inspired them and past leaders they looked up to. The informants shared how they developed their leadership skills by working closely with former leaders and thesis directors—not by being directly guided, but by being in the decision-making rooms with them. This, in turn, led some participants to adopt leadership styles and exhibit male stereotypes of leadership (tough, rigid,

authoritarian) early in their careers, which alienated them from other women who also displayed these traits in their leadership.

The study found that participants felt confident in their roles as leaders in higher education. Their leadership style, even if not specifically mentioned, incorporated traits such as inclusivity, trust, and teamwork, which were core to their practice. They "[adapted] their style to the needs of their staff, students, and the educational context" (Tan, 2025, p. 3). Fostering mentorship programs for women, developing their skills, and informing women about professional growth in higher education can encourage employers in higher education to consider women's perspectives and well-being for leadership roles. Additionally, advancing studies on women's leadership will provide institutions, organizations, and industry leaders with relevant information for mentorship and inclusivity initiatives aimed at reducing the gender gap within their organizations.

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