
Supporting leadership development: Women academics in the Hong Kong academy

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Supporting leadership development: Women academics in the Hong Kong academy

Abstract

This quantitative and qualitative study explores the leadership challenges for women academics in the Hong Kong academy. It is informed by the theoretical lens of intersectionality and Mohanty's feminism, which seeks to give a voice to women in different nations and regions. Findings show that the majority of women did not feel supported to enter a leadership role and that the perceived barriers to doing so differed between women academics and senior male leaders. Academic women are negotiating several identities, the most pertinent of which relates to being Chinese or non-Chinese, in addition to age, length of time in the profession, and rank. Power and patriarchy were identified as the most influential factors limiting women's potential. Practice-based interventions that developmentally start with what women want are discussed. Key messages from the research are the need for a level of consciousness-raising, and the education of men, in relation to the barriers academic women face, along with widespread support for the development of a sector-wide women academics' leadership programme.

Practitioner Notes

1. Familiarity with the extensive research evidence that relates to the barriers and enablers to women academics becoming leaders in higher education by senior leaders will better support policy interventions. A research-informed approach to gender equity by senior leaders would provide a more effective framework to promote organizational culture change.
2. There is a strong appetite amongst women academics in Hong Kong to attend a sector-wide women's academic leadership programme. The development of such a programme could be taken forward by the President's committee, in conjunction with the University Grants Committee.

Keywords

women academics, leadership development, Hong Kong

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women as academic leaders is a well-documented global phenomenon. Extensive research shows women ‘fail’ to move through academic hierarchies and reach the most senior leadership positions (Morley, 2014; Drew and Canavan, 2021). How and why the gender leadership gap remains is complex, with research indicating numerous factors that contribute to this enduring social justice problem. These factors include stereotyping and unconscious bias (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2008; Bailyn, 2003), resulting in women undertaking different, less prestigious roles (Ropes-Huilman, 2000; Turner, 2002; Schein, 2007); and a greater involvement in teaching, student welfare and academic ‘housekeeping’ (Acker and Feuerverger, 1996; Aiston and Jung, 2015; Magoqwana et al., 2020, Subbaya and Vithal, 2017), rather than research which is predominantly privileged and rewarded in the academy (Macfarlane, 2012; Baker, 2012, Fitzgerald, 2014). The neoliberal academy is positioned as one in which faculty are penalized for doing anything other than research (Breslin, 2021), with Vice-Chancellors’ career trajectories to senior leadership predicated upon their being ‘top’ researchers (Breakwell and Tytherleigh, 2008). Women academics are excluded from elite (male) groups and important networks (Elg and Jonnergard, 2009; Kjeldal et al., 2006; Bagihole, 2007) and the organizational cultures of the academy are seen as both reproducing and privileging masculine practices and norms (Husu and Morley, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2002; Bailyn, 2003; Harley, 2003; Ozkanli et al., 2009), with leadership implicitly constructed as male (Madera, Hebl and Martin, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2014).

The purpose of this article is to explore leadership challenges for women within the Hong Kong academy, paying particular attention to the intersection of gender, ethnicity, culture and age. In addition, the article will consider practice-based implications, particularly the development of women’s leadership programmes. This research contributes to, and extends, work within this context (Aiston, 2014; Aiston and Yang, 2017; Aiston, Fo and Law, 2020; Aiston and Fo, 2021; Yip, Xiao and Fay, 2020, Ruan, 2020). With a ‘foot in two cultures’, Hong Kong culturally has more of an affinity with China than the West, however, Hong Kong’s higher education sector has had great similarity with those in the West, with many academics having been trained in the West (Postiglione and Wang, 2009). The region also has a strong higher education sector, relative to its size; four out the eight University Grant Committee (UGC) funded institutions are ranked in the ‘top 100’ universities (THE World University Rankings, 2022).

Theoretical framing

This research is theoretically informed by Mohanty’s work (1998, 2003) which urges us to challenge the notion of using Western experience as the reference point for all experience and to give a voice to counter-hegemonic, competing and non-Western perspectives. Mohanty’s feminism is embedded in ‘local’ experience and complexity, with a commitment to understand the nuanced experiences of women in different nations and regions (Greenalough-Spencer, 2017). Similarly, this research is foregrounded by a commitment to looking beyond the Western academy and contributes to scholarship that seeks to understand the experience of women academics beyond the Western world.

Intersectionality is also an important theoretical aspect of this research, recognising the limitations of focusing solely on both singular forms of disadvantage (e.g., single axis analysis; Crenshaw, 1989) and conventional forms of disadvantage (Macfarlane and Jefferson, 2020). Intersectionality is used to analyse how the Hong Kong higher education system and institutions include, exclude and are experienced by women academics in ways that produce advantage and disadvantage.

Nichol and Stahl’s systematic literature review on intersectionality in higher education research (2019), asks what vectors of identity are included, and what intersections are made available to the researcher’s gaze. This issue of where the emphasis lies is an analytical consideration. For example, class might provide the ‘entry point’ to an analysis of gender and racialized class practices (see Acker, 2006) or *alternatively* race could be foregrounded within an analysis (see Preston and Bhopal, 2012). As was the case with the majority of higher education research explicitly adopting intersectionality in Nichols and Stahl’s (2019) review, this research adopted gender as the primary ‘identity vector’, with which other dimensions of difference were combined, including ethnicity. Nichols and Stahl’s (2019) review found few instances where intersectional analysis had included age, family responsibilities and place-based identities (e.g. country of origin). This research includes those identities, in addition to also exploring to what extent disciplinary identity shapes experience. The literature review also noted that studies that emphasise how gender and ethnicity intersect mainly look at the experiences of minority groups in Western higher education contexts. This paper makes an important contribution to the field by analysing the experience of non-Asian women, as the minority group, in an Asian context, and how gender intersects with ‘foreignness’ in considering the experiences of women scholars working across geographic boundaries (Strauß and Boncori, 2020).

Research method

Hearing the views of Hong Kong women academics themselves is central to understanding the ‘absence’ of women in the most senior leadership roles in the Hong Kong higher education sector. An online questionnaire, grounded in the research literature, was developed and piloted. The sampling frame was women academics across the 8 UGC-funded universities – University of Hong Kong, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Lingnan University, Baptist University Hong Kong, Hong Kong Polytechnic, Hong Kong City University and the Education University of Hong Kong. Each of the Presidents were asked if an email informing staff of the online survey could be sent out in their institution’s bulk mail. Not all of the Presidents agreed and in these cases, and also where it became clear that female faculty in particular institutions were not aware of the survey, women academics were contacted directly with details of the online survey. The survey was carried out in Autumn 2015. In total 437 responses were received from the online survey. Of this number, 361 were valid responses (25% response rate). The valid responses form the basis of analysis.

Section 1 of the survey sought personal information about the respondents (see Appendix 1). Section 2 of the survey focused on higher education leadership. Respondents were asked to reflect on the barriers and enablers to support women academics in becoming leaders. Importantly, the barriers were considered at the level of the institution/profession and also culturally. The survey contained a series of closed and open questions. The closed questions were Likert scale and non-Likert scale questions. The Likert scale used in the survey was as follows:

Not at all	→	To some extent	←	Very much so
1	2	3	4	5

On analysis, Likert-scale questions with a median of 3 or above were 94%. Respondents who chose ‘to some extent’ (3) might, however, have interpreted this as a middle point on the 5-point scale, hence representing a ‘neutral’ option. A conservative approach was therefore taken in this part of the analysis; only choices of ‘4’ or ‘5’ were counted as explicit positive responses on the item. This approach to the analysis and presentation of the Likert-scale questions can be

interpreted as the majority of the respondents agreeing, or highly agreeing, with the item.

Following the descriptive statistical analysis, ANOVA was used to determine statistically significant associations between the independent variables (personal background data: Q.2-14) and the dependent variables (opinions expressed by the respondents in the likert and non-likert scale questions: Q. 15-28). Where the ANOVA analysis indicated statistically significant (p-value < 0.05) difference between three or more independent groups, then post-hoc ANOVA testing was carried out to determine in which group(s) there was a difference in the means (pairwise comparisons).

The survey also provided respondents with the opportunity to express their views qualitatively, particularly in the 'others' free response section at the end of the Likert-scale closed questions and the questions relating to the Asian cultural context. Thematic analysis was carried out on the qualitative survey data adopting a three-stage coding approach (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). First, basic coding was carried out. Second, attention was given to the content of what was said, to generate themes to reflect the language interviewees used. Third, abstraction from what the interviewees had said took place to aid the creation of broad analytic themes.

In addition to seeking the views of the target audience of a women's leadership development programme, the views of the Presidents/Vice-Chancellors of the 8 UGC-funded Hong Kong universities and two further senior, male leaders in the sector were sought. Five Presidents/Vice-Chancellors agreed to be interviewed, making a total of 7 interviewees. This aspect of the research provided an opportunity to explore a potentially multifaceted perspective of the 'definition of the situation':

“We find a definition-of-the situation approach to be helpful in framing the contradictory ways in which female and male faculty members...describe the problems faced by women academics. We see real consequences...when their male colleagues fail to understand the complexities and challenges of women's lives, given men's disproportionate power and influence in shaping institutional norms and policies” (Rhoads and Gu, 2011, p. 738).

A semi-structured interview approach was taken to explore the leaders' perceptions of the enablers and barriers to women's entry to academic leadership. The interviews were fully transcribed, the transcripts anonymised and the anonymity of the interviewees protected in the reporting of the data. Thematic analysis was undertaken (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) and attention paid to what extent there was an alignment in how female faculty and senior male leaders conceptualised issues. Ethics approval for the survey and interviews was given by the Research Ethics Committee, University of Hong Kong (reference: EA1509044).

Leadership challenges

Respondents were asked if they felt supported/encouraged to consider, or enter, a leadership role within their institution. Table 1 shows that two-thirds of respondents did not feel supported.

Table 1

Do you feel supported/encouraged to enter a leadership role?

Answer	Frequency	Percent
Yes	120	34.1
No	232	65.9
Total	352	100.0

This finding mirrors previous research (Morley, 2006). 180 (51% of) respondents went on to explain their answer qualitatively. The higher education profession is conceived as male-dominated, with the equation of leadership = male. Whilst being male was the unifying variable to ‘fitting’ the leadership profile, other important intersecting variables were identified, differences which most likely are attributable to different institutional staff compositions. This included not being ‘local’ and also being ‘local’ and not having one’s intellectual input valued, not being Caucasian and not being Chinese. The following quotation indicates how the intersection of gender, ethnicity and disciplinary expertise can coalesce to exclude entry to leadership:

... it is extremely unlikely that I will be able to move beyond department leadership at this institution, as it is heavily male (Chinese) dominated. I'm female, do not speak Putonghua or Cantonese, and in the Faculty of Arts. Three strikes against me despite my proven ability in leadership.

Another respondent commented how local Hong Kong women academics are seen as more ‘caring’ and that this perception, in combination with being bilingual, results in heavier workloads at the expense of pursuing a leadership trajectory.

Respondents articulated a lack of support and professional development opportunities and a lack of transparency in selection processes. The ‘glass ceiling’ and being ‘overlooked’ were further impediments to women’s entry to senior leadership roles; specifically that ‘middle’ management and second in command was as far as they might be ‘allowed’ to go. What was striking was the level of awareness that respondents articulated in reference to being allocated work that was not beneficial to promotion and leadership roles. These tasks were conceptualised as nurturing/caring roles (Ropes-Huilman, 2000); ‘thankless work’ such as committee work – without titles, recognition or decision-making - and large-scale introductory teaching. Male colleagues being allocated more favourable workloads was also raised (Kjeldal, et. al., 2006). In addition, there was the recognition that leadership is given according to rank, and given the underrepresentation of women as full professors, gender was identified as an issue.

The silence/ing of academic women was a further aspect that stood out as advancing our understanding of the barriers academic women face (Aiston and Fo, 2021). Respondents noted the ways in which their suggestions were ignored, and opportunities to express an opinion denied. Keeping quiet was seen as strategically the best way to potentially secure their career advancement, particularly for junior and untenured women academics. Respondents referred to keeping their ‘mouth shut’, biting their tongue, lying ‘low’ and not challenging the status quo. This strategic approach was to avoid being cast as ‘troublemakers’. Powerful women were recognized as being the antithesis to gendered norms in relation to conceptions of femininity; ‘culture tells her that men abandon women who speak too loudly, or who are too present’ (Griffin, quoted in Luke, 1994, p. 218):

I'm pretty outspoken but am worried about speaking out sometimes because I know it might be held against me. I often have to play dumb and 'feminine' to get along and have to be careful that men's egos aren't hurt.

The intersection of gender, ethnicity, culture and place was also evident;

... the way to survive as a non-local female staff is to be agreeable'; HATE THE ASIAN FEMALE EXPECTATION (NOT SUPPOSED TO STAND OUT)

... having worked in the UK and HK as an academic, I notice that in meetings my fellow women colleagues who are from Asia are much less likely to speak up. In fact, this became very apparent to me when I realised I seemed to be the only woman talking at a Faculty Research Committee meeting. I thought to myself 'oh should I shut-up?, will they be thinking here goes this gwelio woman again'. Then I analyse if I should mediate my behaviour? Do I need to adopt a different approach, a 'seemingly' different attitude, to achieve the same outcome?

Respondents were then surveyed on specific items concerning the challenges women academics face in entering leadership roles (Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2

What barriers do women academics face in becoming higher education leaders?

Q20	What barriers do you think women academics face in becoming leaders in higher education?	Mean score	Percent (Median=4 or 5)
20_1	Difficulties in balancing family and domestic responsibilities with work	3.97	64.6
20_2	Not reaching the position of full Professor	3.76	62.6
20_3	Gender stereotypes (e.g., leadership associated with men)	3.70	61.0
20_4	Gender bias (e.g., men chosen rather than women)	3.68	58.4
20_5	Heavy teaching and administrative responsibilities	3.78	61.9
20_6	Lack of time to build their research profile	3.67	58.2
20_8	Lack of mentorship	3.52	53.1
20_9	Lack of women role models	3.52	54.8
20_10	Lack of a critical mass of women	3.57	57.2
20_11	Lack of transparency in the selection process	3.80	64.3
20_12	Lack of development opportunities	3.63	57.6

Table 3

Summary of mean scores for what barriers women academics face in becoming higher education leaders (Q. 20)

Mean	3.66
Count	342
Median	4

The only item that the majority of respondents did not have a positive response to was the item 'exclusion from male in-groups/networks'. The post-hoc ANOVA analysis revealed some interesting insights. Married respondents, respondents with children, and untenured member of staff (on tenure track) were more positive on the item 'difficulties in balancing family and work' than single respondents, respondents with no children, and tenured staff. Married women, respondents on the tenure track, and women who identified themselves as not originally from Hong Kong or Mainland China were more positive on the item 'not reaching full Professor' than single women, tenured staff, or those originally from China. Women academics not originally from Hong Kong or Mainland China and who identified themselves as ethnically white were also more positive than women from China both originally and ethnically on a number of items: gender stereotypes, gender bias, lack of women roles models, mentorship and a critical mass of women, lack of transparency in the selection process and lack of development opportunities (See Appendix 2 for an example of ANOVA analysis relating to women not originally from Mainland China or Hong Kong).

A multifaceted perspective: the views of executive male leaders

The Presidents and other senior leaders in the Hong Kong higher education sector were also asked to reflect on what they saw as the barriers women academics might face in reaching senior leadership roles. As noted in the data collection and analysis section, one of the aims of the research was to provide a multifaceted perspective of the 'definition of the situation', that is to explore to what extent there is alignment in how female faculty and senior, executive male leaders conceptualise the issue.

Family was articulated as a barrier to women entering the most senior leadership roles. The reasons for this, however, did differ amongst the interviewees. For one interviewee, women were regarded as more likely to want to spend time at home:

Female, a lot of, not all, but some female give us the impression...that they sometimes want to spend more time at home and not the career. Male are more egotistic, career-driven, they are less of, I'm stereotyping, I don't know is true or not, but if you look at the statistics and pretty much I think it could be true that male are career-driven rather than home-caring and so on.

Interestingly, when survey respondents were asked, why would you be reluctant to become a leader, work/life balance was not an item the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed was a significant factor. The notion that women might not be as career-focused was articulated by another interviewee, whilst another reflected 'are women faculty members less ambitious or less prepared to be considered, or more worry to failure, less prepared to take a risk?' According to another interviewee, women with children were not able to dedicate the same amount of time to their careers, particularly research.

Fewer women role models and women potentially 'feeling' that it is a man's world were also highlighted as barriers. Only one of the interviewees suggested gender bias had a role to play in women not reaching senior positions:

I suspect that there is this phenomenon of people appointing in their own image and I think in universities at the moment certainly in Hong Kong, a lot of selection processes are run by men.

In contrast to the views of the above respondent, what was evident was a belief in the concept of a meritocracy and a lack of understanding of the role of unconscious bias, as the following quotation illustrates:

I don't think, honestly, do not think the leadership in academia has...so many discrimination against women in taking the top jobs. I mean I Chair a number of committees, promotions and substantiations...I don't think any decision bodies would say "oh, this job we want a man to do it". I don't think this is the case alright. We tend to find the most qualified and most suitable person for the jobs.

When the above interviewee was asked directly about unconscious bias there was acknowledgment that unconscious bias 'may' happen, but the implication followed that there is a lack of qualified women candidates: '...but the foot side of a coin is...we have a job...that requires 1, 2, 3,...5, you know, virtues or requirements.' The following exchange with another interviewee further illustrates the lack of awareness of unconscious bias in decision-making processes:

Interviewer: So do you accept the need to do something to deal with this? (*the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles*)

Interviewee: Well, I think...number one, I think in terms of our promotion system...I mean gender is not a consideration...

Interviewer: And in terms of saying that the promotion system is not an issue, what do you mean by that?

Interviewee: No, I'm not saying it's not an issue. I say when colleagues are considered, gender is not a factor. It's mainly about performance in teaching and research and service. Yes, and so our criteria are written in a such a way is really...unrelated to gender.

The Presidents and senior leaders largely attributed the barriers to women academics reaching senior leadership roles, to circumstances that could be considered as beyond the control of the university, namely, a focus on the individual and their life choices and wider cultural issues (discussed further below). In this regard, there is a lack of alignment with the range of factors that the respondents to the survey agreed or highly agreed with.

Asian culture

Respondents to the survey and interviewees were explicitly asked to reflect on to what extent Asian culture might serve as a barrier to women academics entering senior leadership roles. The premise for this line of questioning was research which suggests that traditional Asian culture promotes a particular concept of femininity, including a premium on a woman's roles as wife, mother and homemaker, not been seen as more successful than their husband, and their public conduct as subdued, quiet and withdrawn (Luke, 1998; 2000).

The presidents and other senior leaders indicated that Asian/Chinese culture might influence how women might be expected to prioritise their roles and they should not be seen to ‘outshine’ their husbands (although for one interviewee this was not an issue confined to Asian culture). Asian culture was positioned as more male-dominated, but with the caveat that traditional views of femininity were more likely to be held by the older generation and that ‘strong’ women were visible in key positions in government and the corporate sector in Hong Kong.

Respondents to the survey held mixed opinions. For some, the stigma of being more successful than your partner and the expectation that women prioritise family was not an Asian issue; ‘this is a misogynist belief worldwide’. Other factors, including systemic problems in the profession, were articulated as playing a greater role in preventing women from entering senior leadership. Other respondents, however, whilst acknowledging generational changes in attitudes, were more reticent; ‘being an Assistant Professor already sounds “honourable” enough; ‘traditional cultural values are still held strongly’. The discourse of women with PhDs as a ‘third sex’, prevalent in Mainland China, was also referred to. This discourse cautions women against becoming *too* educated in order that they do not jeopardise their marriage prospects (Aiston, 2016). Interestingly, comments were made in relation to not overstating the role of Asian culture:

... culture can overstate the problem – isn’t the issue patriarchy more broadly?

Whilst traditions always linger, we need to be careful not to be victimised by tradition beyond its due influence. Talking and stressing its influence may ironically create an additional dose of influence and work against our transcendence of the traditional.

Relatedly, the respondents were keen to emphasise women’s agency, irrespective of cultural expectations. There were references to women questioning and overcoming stereotypes, defying ‘social structures’:

I do not want to overemphasise the deterministic power of these social norms and social structures; I believe in the agency of women to change things.

Leadership enablers

Women academics were asked to consider what they thought would enable/support women to become leaders in higher education. Tables 4 and 5 show that the majority of respondents give positive responses on all but one of the items – that item being the introduction of quotas. The post-hoc ANOVA analysis indicated that respondents aged 30-39 were more positive on the item university nursery provision than respondents aged 50-59, and that untenured faculty (on the tenure-track) were also more positive on this item than tenured respondents. Married respondents and respondents with children were more positive on the item family-friendly policies than single respondents and respondents with no children. Untenured respondents (on the tenure-track) were also more positive on the items family-friendly policies and flexible working than those tenured respondents.

Table 4

What would support women academics to become leaders?

Q23	What do you think would enable/support women academics to become leaders in higher education?	Mean score	Percent (Median=4 or 5)
23_1	Family-friendly policies (e.g. no meetings beyond the end of the working day)	4.10*	68.9
23_2	University nursery and kindergarten provision	4.06*	70.3
23_3	Flexible working (e.g. flexibility of scheduling working hours)	4.29*	78.4
23_4	A member of the University's Senior Management Team responsible for Equality and Diversity	3.99	69.1
23_5	An associate Dean in each Faculty responsible for Equality and Diversity	3.71	57.7
23_6	Clear and transparent selection process and guidelines	4.35*	83.4
23_7	Mentoring	4.13*	76.6
23_8	Personal and professional networking outside the institution	4.04*	75.4
23_9	Professional development opportunities (e.g. training, workshops, conferences)	3.96	69.4

* Items respondents were particularly positive on.

Table 5

Summary of mean scores for what would support women academics to become leaders (Q.23)

Mean	3.98
Count	342
Median	4

Respondents made a number of comments in the 'others' section (32 responses). Of particular note was the need for reflection by, and 'education' of, senior leaders and male faculty:

Our deans, heads, and chairs should know the gender inequity research inside-out and make a big point of this to every hiring committee: the research on evaluation is particularly telling (changing the name on a CV or article changes how it is assessed).

Critical and deep reflection on the part of those in management positions to unpack their assumptions, values, and practices which may lead to a male-dominated culture, and reduced opportunities for women. This is an extremely

difficult task to do, but it is only when those in 'power' are willing to challenge their own privileges that change can begin. The change is cultural one and it takes time, leadership and ongoing critical conversations.

There was a clear steer that male staff generally needed to be 'educated' about the inequalities that women face, and that such inequalities are 'often not explicit ones, but subtle ones', which we might conceptualise as 'micro-inequalities' (Aiston and Fo, 2021). The role of Head of Department (=male) was flagged as crucial in either supporting or obstructing career advancement.

Women's academics' leadership training

Respondents were asked their opinion on the development of a women's leadership programme in Hong Kong, with 83% (278) indicating this was needed. The post-hoc ANOVA analysis showed women in the first seven years of their careers were more positive on this question than respondents who had been in the profession for 20+ years. Nearly three-quarters (237) of the respondents indicated they would want to attend. The Presidents and senior leaders were also supportive of a programme. In discussing different ways in which such a programme could be financed, the general opinion of the interviewees was that UGC financing would be 'cleaner' and easier, in addition to signalling the importance of the issue to the sector.

Respondents then provided an opinion as to what would be helpful to include in a women's academic leadership programme (see Table 6 and 7). The development of a women-only network and fundraising were the only items not seen as particularly helpful. The post-hoc ANOVA analysis revealed that Assistant Professors and untenured (on the tenure track) faculty were more positive on the item organizational cultures than Associate Professors and tenured members of staff.

Table 6

What would be helpful to include in a programme?

Q27	Which of the following aspects would be helpful to include in a programme?	Mean Score	Percent (Median=4-5)
27_1	Mentoring	3.97	66.4
27_2	Career planning	4.03*	72.7
27_3	Skills development (e.g., influencing skills, team working)	3.96	70.3
27_5	Financial management of department/faculty/or institution	3.69	57.6
27_7	Human Resource Management	3.78	64.0
27_8	Effective chairing	3.88	67.3
27_9	Approaches to Leadership	4.08*	76.9
27_10	Organizational cultures (e.g. power, politics)	4.04*	73.4
27_11	Insights from women academic leaders in Hong Kong	4.17*	77.8

* Items respondents were particularly positive on.

Table 7

Summary of mean scores of what would be helpful to include in a programme (Q.27)

Mean	3.84
Count	323
Median	4

A number of further suggestions were made, including:

- hearing from those women with families who had reached senior leadership roles – and their husbands
- a general awareness of the ways in which women are excluded from academic leadership
- finding alternative ways to play the ‘system’
- managing a work/life balance
- how to foster self-esteem, and
- how to navigate gender politics/a male-dominated environment.

The following quotation is illustrative of the final point:

How to be a Woman Leader when the majority to be Led are Men, How to Handle Inappropriate Comments in University/Professional Setting, How to Handle Gender-Based Discrimination, How to Work with Male Supervisors/Colleagues Who are Insensitive and Unaware.

Again, respondents were clear that male colleagues had a role to play; training for men was seen as key to the advancement of women as academic leaders:

If there is any cultural bias that a woman needs to break free from, that needs to be trained in the presence of men but not in isolation. There needs to be concurrent diversity training for men academics...men need to be trained to act differently. It is not enough to empower women. Male leaders need training too.

The enabling profession

Given the complexity of the problem, a whole range of interventions are required to support academic women. We might conceptualise such interventions on three levels; institutionally, individually and in terms of building a gender research evidence base (Morley, 2012).

The enabling institution

An enabling institution will be proactive in mainstreaming gender, which would include, for example, introducing gender equity policies and processes, challenging discriminatory structures, and carrying out gender impact assessments, audits and reviews and work-life balance schemes (Morley, 2012).

This survey also strongly suggests the need for senior leaders to be cognizant with the extensive research evidence on the underrepresentation of women as academic leaders. The interviews with the Presidents and other senior male leaders revealed a focus on familial responsibilities as the primary explanation to account for the absence of academic women in leadership roles. This research, and previous research, clearly shows that this is only one dimension of this enduring problem. Moreover, not all women academics are married, not all women academics have children

and not all women with familial responsibilities are less research productive than those without such roles (Aiston and Jung, 2015).

The senior leaders also generally held a firm belief in the concept of a meritocracy. Higher education was positioned as a meritocratic and gender blind system. The ideal of a meritocracy is in the DNA of modern universities (Neilsen, 2021) and society in general (Sandel, 2020). As one respondent to the survey wrote 'It's the 21st century and men here still say 'we need to hire the best people' as an excuse for not hiring women and minorities. Check the literature.' Resistance to the introduction of quotas by some male leaders was made on the grounds that the quality supposedly provided by a meritocratic system would be, or perceived to have been, compromised. Defending the discourse of a meritocracy is seen as counterproductive to systematic structural change and the analysis of male privilege (Morley, 2006). Relatedly, the lack of understanding of the role of unconscious bias provides a further impediment to tackling this complex issue.

A research-led approach to the issue of gender equity in higher education by senior leaders would provide a more effective framework to promote organizational cultural change. As one respondent to the survey commented, senior leaders need to challenge their own assumptions and bias and examine their organisations. This research has also shown the key role Heads of Departments play in either supporting or obstructing women faculty. An informed understanding of the issues women academics face is therefore required at all levels of leadership to ensure that there is not a dissonance between an institution's commitment to gender mainstreaming and its application at school/department level (Aiston, Fo and Law, 2020). This research also indicates the challenge facing institutions is how to ensure that academic women are not silenced and that in their minority status, the 'danger' attached to being a vocal woman is removed.

Enabling the individual

Capacity development programmes' which now operate in a diverse range of international contexts (for example, Aurora in the UK and the IDAS programme in Sweden) are seen as one approach to supporting women individually (Morley, 2012). Research indicates that formal support structures, such as leadership programmes, have an important role to play in enabling women academics to succeed (Ely et. al., 2011; Redmond, et. al., 2016; Peterson, 2019; Barnard et al., 2021). The majority of respondents to the survey (84%) said a women's academic leadership programme was needed in Hong Kong, with 237 respondents indicating they would want to attend. Women faculty early in their careers were particularly keen to attend, with junior women academics particularly interested in learning about organizational cultures. The Presidents and other senior male leaders were also supportive of such a programme.

For a number of respondents to the survey, there was a clear sense that such a programme should not be a 'ghetto' exercise. Women *and* men, particularly senior male leaders, need to be involved in order that men understand the issues women academics face. This finding is supported by the successful development of similar programmes internationally; 'we stress the critical importance of a visible presence by senior organizational leaders during the programme (Harris and Leberman, 2012, p. 40).

Opinions were mixed as to whether a women academics' leadership programme would be best held within individual institutions, sector-wide or a combination of both. On balance research suggests a sector-wide programme would be the best way forward in the first instance. Previous research highlights the benefits of taking a sector-wide approach. New Zealand's Women in Leadership programme (NZWIL) 'started at the top' with a strong joint organizing and steering committee with the support of the New Zealand Vice-Chancellor's committee. The nationwide approach was seen as removing any institutional competition and contributing to the sector's talent

pool of women leaders. In addition, the benefits of leadership development conducted in sector-wide peer groups was clear from the evaluation of the programme; learning was ‘enhanced when beyond the individual workplace’ (Harris and Leberman, 2012). A starting point for the development of a Hong Kong women academics’ leadership programme would be for the President’s committee (HUCOM), in conjunction with the UGC, to meet to discuss the development and financing of a sector-wide programme.

Enabling knowledge

This research provides a large-scale empirical research basis into why there are so few women in senior leadership roles in the Hong Kong higher education sector. In the Western academy, ‘intersectionality’ has become an important analytical approach to understand diversity of experience. Within the context of this research a number of key variables stood out. In the global economy of higher education, and correspondingly the internationalization of academic staff, it was clear that women academics are negotiating several identities, the most pertinent of which seemed to be related to being Chinese (and here it is important to make the distinction between Hong Kong Chinese and Mainland Chinese), or non-Chinese and ethnically white and the intersection with gender. In addition, length of time in the profession, age, rank and tenure status were also important intersecting variables when analysing item responses.

It is important to continue to take a context-specific, research-led approach to this issue. For example, in the event of the development of a Hong Kong sector-wide women academics’ leadership programme, a robust and ongoing longitudinal evaluation of the programme would be an important part of the process.

Conclusion

The three intervention levels, discussed above, need to take place in tandem for maximum impact. Research suggests that approaches which focus on one area, for example, enabling the individual, without addressing organizational cultures that reproduce inequality are fundamentally flawed (De Vries, 2010, discussed in Morley, 2012). This point was clearly articulated by the respondents to the survey; gender inequality was not positioned as a ‘woman’s problem’. In seeking women’s opinions on the development of a women’s leadership programme, this research has sought to move away from a “fix the women” framework, to one which developmentally starts with what women want (Peterson, 2019). Giving the complexity of this issue a range of interventions are required. A key message of this research is the need for a level of consciousness-raising, and the education of men, in relation to the barriers academic women face.

As discussed, analysing intersectional diversity has been central to this research to understand how intersecting identities shape women academics’ experiences, views and needs. For example, staff classified as international particularly raised concerns about gender stereotyping, gender bias, the lack of role models, mentorship and developmental opportunities. They were especially keen to see a women’s leadership programme delivered in Hong Kong. Whilst as noted earlier, gender was the primary ‘identity’ vector, this approach to the analysis was subsequently supported by the respondents themselves, who emphasised that power and patriarchy were the most influential factors limiting women’s potential. Addressing systemic problems in the sector – such as the recruitment and promotion of women, a lack of institutional support, and transparency in selection processes – was identified as key. Whilst this research has focused upon the Hong Kong academy, the findings have wider implications for Asian higher education more broadly and beyond. Since this research was undertaken, the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely reported and increasingly researched as negatively impacting academic women (Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2021). This

indicates that sector-wide and institutional support for women's academic career development continues to be a priority area.

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Appendix 1 Personal Background of Survey Respondents

The personal backgrounds of the survey respondents were as follows:

Age: 40% (146) of the respondents were under the age of 40; 35% (127) were aged between 40-49, and 24% (87) of the respondents were aged 50+.

Marital status: 71% (257) of respondents indicated they were married or had a partner, with 29% (103) stating they were single.

Children: 51% (184) of respondents had children, 49% (174) did not.

Number of children: 45% (83) of respondents had one child, 45% (83) of respondents had two children, whilst 9% (17) had 3+ children.

Age of children: 31% (93) of respondents had children aged 5 and below, 27% (81) had children aged 6-12, 15% (44) had children aged 13-18, whilst 27% had children over the age of 18.

Place of origin: 48% (172) of respondents indicated that they originally came from Hong Kong, 14% (50) said they were from Mainland China and 38% (138) of respondents noted they originally came from outside of China. Responses included wider Asia, Australia, Canada, Europe, Taiwan, UK, and USA.

Ethnic origin: 49% (158) of respondents identified themselves as ethnically Chinese, with 16% (50) of respondents identifying themselves as ethnically Hong Kong/Hong Kong Chinese. 19% (61) identified as White/Caucasian, 9% (30) as Asian and 7% (23) as 'other'.

Highest earned degree: 85% (311) respondents had a PhD/Professional Doctorate.

Current academic rank: 34% (122) of respondents were Assistant Professors, 20% (72) were Associate Professors and 12% (44) Full Professors. 12% of respondents were Lecturers, with the remaining respondents including, Research Assistant Professors (3%), Senior Lecturers (4%) and Post-doctoral Fellows (6%).

Discipline: 27% (97) of respondents were employed in the social sciences, 24% (84) in the arts and humanities, 15% (55) in science, technology, maths and engineering, 6% (23) in business and economics and 5% (19) in law. Eight respondents were categorized as working in 'other' disciplines.

Current employment status: 97% (346) of respondents worked full-time, with 3% (11) of respondents working part-time.

Current tenure status: 31% (113) of respondents were tenured faculty members, 33% (118) were untenured members of staff on the tenure track, with 36% (128) of respondents untenured, and not on the tenure track.

Respondents were not asked their name or institutional affiliation. This was important to ensure the confidentiality of respondents.

Appendix 2

Example of ANOVA analysis relating to women not originally from Mainland China or Hong Kong

Table 2 (Question 20): What barriers do you think women academics face in becoming leaders in Higher Education by origin not mainland China or Hong Kong (Q5_3)

ANOVAs of what barriers do you think women academics face in becoming leaders in Higher Education by originally not from mainland China or Hong Kong (Other)						
Q20		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
20_1	Between Groups	3.316	4	.829	.747	.561
	Within Groups	338.478	305	1.110		
	Total	341.794	309			
20_2	Between Groups	20.952	4	5.238	3.542	0.008
	Within Groups	445.077	301	1.479		
	Total	466.029	305			
20_3	Between Groups	38.813	4	9.703	6.323	0.000
	Within Groups	469.624	306	1.535		
	Total	508.437	310			
20_4	Between Groups	45.997	4	11.499	7.311	0.000
	Within Groups	479.697	305	1.573		
	Total	525.694	309			
20_5	Between Groups	14.045	4	3.511	2.534	0.040
	Within Groups	418.534	302	1.386		
	Total	432.580	306			
20_6	Between Groups	3.484	4	.871	.585	0.673
	Within Groups	449.285	302	1.488		
	Total	452.769	306			
20_7	Between Groups	38.471	4	9.618	5.568	0.000
	Within Groups	521.634	302	1.727		
	Total	560.104	306			
20_8	Between Groups	19.247	4	4.812	3.141	0.015
	Within Groups	462.668	302	1.532		
	Total	481.915	306			
20_9	Between Groups	36.223	4	9.056	5.233	0.000
	Within Groups	520.836	301	1.730		
	Total	557.059	305			
20_10	Between Groups	34.669	4	8.667	5.416	0.000
	Within Groups	483.253	302	1.600		
	Total	517.922	306			
20_11	Between Groups	33.850	4	8.463	5.200	0.000
	Within Groups	493.069	303	1.627		
	Total	526.919	307			
20_12	Between Groups	17.555	4	4.389	2.942	0.021
	Within Groups	451.965	303	1.492		
	Total					

The results of the ANOVAs for what barriers do you think women academics face in becoming leaders in higher education by the respondents not originally from mainland China or Hong Kong

(other origin) show that for a number of the barriers detailed in Table 2 the results are statistically significant at the $p=0.05$ level.

The statistically significant identified barriers for those not from mainland China or Hong Kong are as follows:

Q20	What barriers do you think women academics face in becoming leaders in higher education?	Sig ($p=0.05$)
20_2	Not reaching the position of full Professor	0.008
20_3	Gender stereotypes (e.g. leadership associated with men)	0.000
20_4	Gender bias (e.g. men chosen rather than women)	0.000
20_5	Heavy teaching and administrative responsibilities	0.040
20_7	Exclusion from male in-groups/networks	0.000
20_8	Lack of mentorship	0.015
20_9	Lack of women role models	0.000
20_10	Lack of a critical mass of women	0.000
20_11	Lack of transparency in the selection process	0.000
20_12	Lack of development opportunities	0.021