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Vivienne Griffiths¹

1) Faculty of Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom.

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Women Leaders in Higher Education: Organizational Cultures and Personal Resilience

Vivienne Griffiths
Canterbury Christ Church University

Abstract

In this article, findings are presented from a study of women leaders in higher education, carried out in two universities in England, focusing particularly on the perspectives of women in a range of leadership roles in a new university. 18 women leaders were interviewed about their experiences of leadership, including day to day and strategic work, relationships with colleagues and forms of support. The analysis draws on a feminist theoretical framework in a changing global context for women in higher education. As in Airini et al. (2011), findings show a close interaction between personal, professional and organizational factors. The new university provided a positive context in terms of numbers of women in senior positions, as well as leadership training, mentoring and female role models, in contrast to the old university where women leaders were still in the minority. The women leaders demonstrated highly skilful, principled leadership styles and a blend of inclusive, collegial approaches with direction and vision. It is argued that a balance was maintained at the new university between new managerialism and a caring ethos, which provided a supportive context for women leaders.

Keywords: Women leaders, leadership, gender and higher education, new managerialism.

Introduction

There are increasing demands worldwide for high quality leadership and management in higher education, but despite some modest increases, there continue to be low numbers of women in these positions (HESA, 2010), a matter of great concern in terms of equity. It is therefore important to study women who have already succeeded in obtaining senior university posts and to identify the leadership skills and qualities that they bring to such roles. It is also vital to highlight the characteristics of supportive academic environments, in which women's potential for academic leadership is recognised and rewarded (Airini et al., 2011). This study makes an important contribution to both these areas.

The research aimed to investigate the nature of women's leadership in two universities in England, the type of work undertaken and relationships with colleagues and senior management; to identify leadership styles and key features of the organizational contexts and cultures; and highlight factors which promoted and supported, or hindered and discouraged, women in leadership roles. The study builds on previous research (Griffiths, 2009) which concentrated on the experiences of women middle managers in a well-established university. In this article, the main focus is on women in a range of leadership roles in a new university. The importance of organizational culture is emphasised and comparisons are drawn between the two contexts in order to highlight the effect of localised cultural differences. Within a feminist and socio-cultural learning framework, I will argue that women leaders tend to be constructed and construct themselves according to the prevailing organizational milieu and ethos of their institution, as well as their personal and professional histories, experiences and characteristics. I will also suggest that, despite the contradictions and drawbacks often associated with a quality-driven, new managerial culture (Deem, 2003; Morley, 2005), in the new university a balance was struck between a competitive, business-oriented approach and a values-based ethos which was largely supportive to women leaders.

The changing global context: women students and academics

Before presenting my own findings, the research needs to be located within the global policy context for higher education. Overall, there has been a steady increase in the representation of women in universities, but with differential rates between countries and between the participation of female students and that of women academics.

Looking at student numbers first, there has been a rapid expansion of female university students over the last ten years, with some very high entry and graduation rates. A recent OECD study of 31 countries (2010) reported that 63% of women are now entering tertiary or higher education, compared with 50% of men. In some countries this rate is far higher; for example, 99% of women enter higher education in Australia, and 94% in Iceland. Overall, these figures show a steady increase; in the UK, for instance, 64% of all undergraduates are now women (*ibid.*) compared to 57% in 2006 (OECD, 2007). UNESCO's latest report (2011) shows that female graduation rates worldwide are higher than men's – 46% of women compared to 30% of men - and very high in some countries: in Finland, 84% of all graduates are women, in New Zealand 82% and in the UK 76%. However, women still make up only 24% of science and engineering students and less than 40% of all research students worldwide (Newman, 2008).

Turning to the global position for women academics, women now represent 33% of all academics; in the UK this figure is 43% (ECU, 2010), so by no means a minority. However, the proportion of women in leadership roles is far lower. UNESCO's report (2002: 24) on women in higher education found that, 'The global picture is one of men outnumbering women at about 5:1 at middle management level and about 20:1 at senior management level.' Worldwide, fewer than 10% of (full) professors are women, although this is nearly double in the UK at 19% (HESA, 2010). A similar position exists for the most senior positions: just below 7% of women lead universities globally, while in the UK 14% of vice chancellors are women (*ibid.*).

Although the number of women in academia is gradually growing, the gap between men's and women's pay is widening at an alarmingly rapid rate (Deem, 2003; ECU, 2009). For instance, in 2010, male academics in the UK were paid just under 20% more than their female

colleagues; in 2007 the difference was 14% (ECU, 2010). Thus, whilst the student population is increasingly female, senior positions in universities are still predominantly held by men, and women are paid less than men for corresponding roles: an unacceptable picture in the twenty first century.

Research on women leaders: from negative to positive?

Previous studies of women in higher education confirm the continuing under-representation of women in management and leadership roles, and situate this within the broader parameters of what a UNESCO report (2002) characterised as a ‘chilly climate’ for women academics worldwide. A range of contributory socio-cultural factors have been identified (*ibid.*), including: the hierarchical nature of universities, traditionally male leadership styles, lack of female role models, male resistance to change, gendered division of labour and in some cases the persistence of overtly discriminatory practices.

Writing from a critical, feminist perspective, Acker and Armenti (2004) argue that, despite these continuing inequities, there is less emphasis in current research on the position and experiences of women academics, compared to a plethora of previous studies over a decade before (e.g. David & Woodward, 1998; Morley & Walsh, 1995).

Their studies of Canadian women academics highlight the anxieties, pressures and sheer exhaustion associated with surviving as a woman in the academy, in spite of an increasingly optimistic rhetoric around women’s representation.

A number of other recent studies, mainly in English-speaking countries, also emphasise the contradictions and difficulties for women within university contexts increasingly driven by performativity, quality measures, business models and financial targets, characterised as new managerialism (Airini et al., 2011; Fisher, 2007), despite women’s greater visibility in senior positions. For example, in a study of women academics and managers in the UK, Morley (2005) identifies the gendered nature of quality assurance which she argues exacerbates divisions of labour rather than reduces them. To illustrate this, she cites evidence that the preparation of quality audits, usually highly onerous

and bureaucratic, falls unevenly on women and men, with women managers bearing the brunt of the work. Likewise, research by Deem (2003) on 'manager-academics' in 16 UK universities also highlights gendered divisions of labour, with women often taking on the unpopular but essential tasks that male managers refuse to do; though she identifies correspondingly negative effects of new managerial approaches on men as well.

Beyond the UK, Blackmore and Sachs (2001), who interviewed women leaders in eight universities in Australia, similarly identify the uneven distribution of benefits resulting from university restructuring, with women in leadership positions taking on disproportionate workloads to meet new demands. They also emphasize the contradictory positioning of women in senior roles, with women expected to be both authoritative and caring in their leadership styles. These findings are reinforced in a study by Gerdes (2010, p.2) in the United States, who points out the previously widely accepted double bind by which leadership characteristics are 'valued when they are possessed by men but not when they are possessed by women.'

Nevertheless, while the research cited above pinpoints the negative effects on women of new managerial cultures in higher education, the often precarious nature of women's leadership positions and the close scrutiny to which their leadership styles are subjected, these and other studies also emphasise the potential advantages to women of greater promotion opportunities, enabling women in senior positions to bring about positive change. A survey carried out by Airini et al. (2011) in New Zealand notes a shift in recent international research findings from an emphasis on disadvantage, to success stories which celebrate the positive contribution of women leaders. For example, Gerdes (2010) comments on a gradual move in relation to women leaders in the academy, whereby women no longer have to adopt traditionally male leadership styles in order to be successful, but can blend these with traditionally female characteristics such as collaboration and caring, thus creating new leadership models. Similarly, Young (2004) notes that women leaders in higher education are increasingly adopting transformational as well as transactional leadership styles in order to effect change to organizational cultures. Recent European studies (Ion and Folch, 2009; Yanez and Moreno, 2008) also report on women

leaders' ability to use flexible and transformative leadership styles to bring about affirmative organizational change. In terms of institutional support, research in the USA (Madden, 2002, Rosser et al., 2003), Australia and Canada (Wyn et al., 2000) emphasizes the importance of female role models and organizational practices such as mentoring, women-only training and women's networks as ways in which women leaders can be motivated, encouraged and supported.

Methodology

An interpretive, qualitative approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) was used in the research, with in-depth interviews as the main method of investigating women leaders' perspectives in two universities. 18 women, nine from each university, were selected, both pragmatically - I had worked in leadership roles in both institutions and had direct access to each - and purposively, as I had a wide knowledge of the personnel in both contexts. I was therefore able to approach women in a variety of leadership roles, though limited by the organizational contexts.

Because of the difference in women's positions in the two universities, I was able to interview some women from more senior leadership and management positions in the new university: there, the women who agreed to take part included deans, research directors and heads of department, while in the old university the women were all heads of department. In both universities, they represented a range of positions from senior or principal lecturers (the latter term was used in the new university) to readers and professors, drawn from arts, humanities and social science faculties; women were largely absent from leadership roles in the sciences. The faculties, departments and research groups led by the women ranged in size from ten to over 100 staff. The women (all white) were aged between mid-30s and late 50s in age and had between one to 15 years' leadership experience.

The interviews, lasting around one to two hours, were carried out in the women's offices - occasionally in my own if that was more convenient - and tape recorded. I also took detailed notes at the time as additional information and wrote up a record as soon as possible

possible afterwards. The interviews yielded ‘rich descriptions’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.12) of the nature of the women’s work, including associated emotions and reflections. They were personally transcribed because of the sometimes sensitive nature of the information and the women were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. For this reason, all names have been changed and some personal information altered or omitted to protect identities. All the women were sent a transcript of their interview so they could check any inaccuracies or send further comments, which a few did in order to elaborate points or add further thoughts. They were also sent copies of related conference papers and articles.

In addition to the interview material, I had access to university statistical data, policy documents and other relevant information. My personal position and experience gave me privileged insight into the contexts in which the other women leaders were working, and provided a further means of corroborating (or otherwise) the data, as well as the ability to compare and contrast perspectives from the two institutions. The international literature enabled me to locate the findings in a wider context and to offer some cautious but grounded conclusions.

Airini et al. (2011) highlight three interlocking domains which affect women’s leadership: personal, professional and organizational; these were strikingly evident in this study too. The major themes identified also match closely those of the New Zealand researchers (ibid.): university environment, leadership work, relationships, personal circumstances and proactivity. In addition, leadership styles, characterized by the skilful way that the women leaders negotiated day to day work alongside the challenges of strategic change, emerge as a major theme, alongside the resilience that they demonstrated in highly demanding circumstances.

Organizational contexts for leadership

There were marked differences between the new and old universities, in terms of age, size, location, staffing, demographic and other organizational characteristics. The new university was a former teacher

training college with a religious foundation, which had recently (five years before) developed into a large, public services-oriented university, with 20,000 students across five campuses in the south east of England, strong links to the local communities in which these were based and a growing research profile. The old university (50 years old), situated on a single campus in a large southern city, was a research-intensive institution of 10,000 students, with a well-established, internationally-recognized academic profile and a larger number of disciplines arranged in multi-disciplinary schools. Both universities were undergoing major restructuring at the time of the research and moving towards what could be characterised as a culture of new managerialism (as in Deem, 2003); a business orientation was already more established at the new university than the old one.

In the new university, women were very well represented at all levels. Half of all the senior positions – senior management team, deans and heads of departments - were held by women, and 33% of the professors were women: nearly twice the national average. In contrast, in the old university, the number of women professors was 16%, below the national average, and there was only one woman (each) in the deans and senior management team. This led to women leaders feeling tokenized and ‘othered’ (Morley, 2003), as we shall see. Thus, at the new university, women were far more strongly represented in leadership as well as management roles. This situation was comparatively recent, however: although the institution had been a largely female teacher training college, one interviewee told me about the previously more gender stereotyped views in the institution. Another explained that women who obtained senior roles had then fought hard behind the scenes to ‘see that women are given a higher profile and are promoted,’ while two others told me that they were the first women in their subjects to obtain senior positions.

In terms of leadership processes and opportunities, there were also substantial differences between the two universities. In the new university, there was a clear leadership structure and people were appointed to leadership and management positions through a competitive, promotional process. Within the previous two years, restructuring had created three new deans’ posts, two of which had

been awarded to women, who took their place in an enlarged senior management team. One of the women deans considered that this was unusual in her experience compared to the (older) university where she worked before and highly valuable for her position: 'Being in the senior management has helped me tremendously to understand the university, the way we manage, the culture of the organization.' There was no overt policy of promoting women – appointments were made on merit – but the climate was supportive to them.

In contrast, in the old university, there had been a long tradition of turn-taking in senior roles, rather than a promotions process; this had tended to perpetuate the dominance of men in these positions. Latterly, a competitive process had been introduced as part of restructuring, but there had been no increase in the number of women appointed to senior positions. One of the women heads of department commented that restructuring was making the university more top down, hierarchical and male dominated than before. Thus, while the overt effects of restructuring at the old university appeared to confirm Blackmore and Sach's (2001) findings that women are adversely affected, at the new university women's promotional chances appeared to be flourishing.

If we look at preparation for leadership, there were again striking differences: while there was little prior training for leadership roles at the old university, at the new university, training for management and leadership roles was widely available for those already in or aspiring to those positions and was generally well received. For instance Carol, a head of department, praised the leadership course she went on highly: 'We discussed leadership styles. It was very influential;' Marie, a new dean, said: 'It was useful in terms of defining a strategy for the faculty...in an inclusive way.' However, several of the longer-standing leaders (from pre-university status) were appointed before such programmes were introduced; for instance, Rosie went on the first in-house leadership course when she was already in post: 'We were guinea pigs. It was too late in the day.' Nevertheless, the university's current investment in staff development and action learning was widely appreciated. Action learning sets and mentoring available for new leaders were mentioned by several of the women as helpful and supportive, similar to Madden (2002) and Rosser et al. (2003). None of

these practices was directly geared to women, but women leaders were benefiting from them.

At the old university, an academic leadership programme had just been introduced, but it was seen by the women managers as a case of 'too little, too late.' However, a new women only action learning set was welcomed as providing much needed support. There were therefore encouraging developments at the older institution, but these were not as firmly established as those at the new university.

Prior experience and female role models

Almost all the women in both universities had previous management and leadership experience, either in other universities or non-academic environments, such as social work, business and teaching. In some cases, this prior personal and professional experience was quite extensive, as examples from the new university demonstrate: for example, Marie had been an associate dean at another university, while Carol had been deputy director of a large public organization. In Carol's and other similar cases, this previously acquired expertise had not been formally recognized at the university and the women had had to work up to their current senior positions through a number of more junior roles, often because of interruptions such as maternity leave. For instance, Anne had a series of part-time, sessional roles at other universities before moving into a full time appointment. Such fragmented career patterns have been widely recognized as affecting women and their promotional opportunities more frequently than men (Acker and Armenti, 2004; Raddon, 2002).

Interestingly, several of the women interviewed at the new university did not recognize the value or relevance of their previous work to their current positions, at least in part because of a former lack of wider recognition or status. Megan, for example, who was in a new research leadership role, had previously been involved in extensive research mentoring which, when asked to think about it, she recognized as, 'in one sense a leadership role – bringing people in.' Megan added that 'this was never acknowledged' within the university and played down

the interpersonal skills and expertise which she brought to her new role. Charlotte was able more readily to see the benefits of the three previous posts that she had held where ‘the management was massive’, although she similarly said, ‘I hadn’t really thought of them being leadership roles.’ Through these she had developed cultural understanding and ‘a particular way of working with [people]’, which stood her in good stead when she became head of a large and complex department with a lot of outreach work. Both women emphasized the importance of developing an inclusive workplace culture with interpersonal relationships at the core.

These and other women leaders at the new university stressed the value and influence of working with, and learning from, women in senior positions. Charlotte described a critical incident involving a woman from the senior management team which had influenced her own leadership style:

I learned from XX early on. I went to a meeting - she was leading it. She had done an assessment and made some decisions about [an issue]. It was a tense meeting. One head of department challenged her... I felt sick listening, thinking how is she going to cope? She was entirely calm, very professional. She went through what she did: ‘I went to other universities and found out what they did... This was the basis for my decision. I’m very happy to listen if you have other evidence.’ So, although I didn’t have any training as such, this was the best training.

Charlotte was impressed with the calm but decisive manner in which the senior woman leader had dealt with resistance, anticipating opposition by collecting supportive evidence. Baxter (2011) provides a compelling linguistic analysis of female business leaders, whose discourse she calls ‘double-voiced’ (drawing on Bakhtin, 1994), because of the way in which they monitor and adjust their language, anticipating and responding to resistance from (usually) men. Baxter argues that this approach can be double-edged, as sometimes women are not assertive enough, but it is also highly skilful and can lead to success in difficult situations, such as the type of meeting described above.

As well as being important role models, such senior women in the new university also provided other women leaders with direct and sustained support, whatever their experience and position. For instance, Megan described positively how she was mentored in her new role by a woman from the senior management, as:

...very supportive. We met once a week. I could talk. Just the opportunity to talk, ask advice, offload, it was incredibly useful. She was wonderful. Always she made me feel valued which was incredibly important.

The extent and continuity of the support offered was not exceptional: Marie and others also described regular meetings with the women who line managed them.

These examples were in stark contrast to the stories of exclusion and lack of support that women leaders told of their experiences in the old university, where they felt marginalised and excluded, and an old boy network and paternalistic attitudes still prevailed (as in Blackmore and Sachs, 2001; Morley, 2003). However, these traditional patterns are not exclusive to old universities - for example, Fisher's (2007) negative account of sexism in a new university - and the perpetrators are not always men. Although women leaders at the new university felt less isolated overall, as there were more of them and they felt more valued for themselves not just as token women, some senior women had not always been as supportive as the examples already cited. In contrast to Megan's account, Carol described working with a former senior woman line manager (now retired) as:

...a very uncomfortable space working for a woman. I saw it as a very masculine way of working. [She had a] very confident front, with no room to question...very controlling. It confounds the stereotype, flips it on its head.

This woman had apparently adopted a 'macho' style of management which was tough and confrontational. Such a stance is widely reported as being characteristic of some of the first women academic leaders,

themselves isolated and unsupported, who felt that they had to take on traditionally masculine leadership styles in order to succeed in a largely male world (see Acker and Armenti, 2004; Gerdes, 2010). Similar accounts were given in the old university too. Hopefully these occurrences are becoming rarer as women leaders become more accepted and develop new ways of working.

Leadership work and leadership styles

For the women in both universities, leadership work was complex, involving time consuming day to day aspects, which were usually people-related, as well as providing strategic direction. This was especially challenging during university restructuring, with greater accountability and target setting (Deem, 2003; Morley, 2005), within a wider climate of economic recession and decreasing funding for higher education.

Daily operations

Rosie, a head of department in the new university, summed up the range of issues facing her on a daily basis:

It's a large department with 1300 students, 17 programmes. The staff are on three sites and teach on three or four. I spend too much time on operational levels. I support programme directors with problems. There can be challenging issues, for example, a student who [had problems] on a placement - we have a duty of care; a human resources issue with a member of staff.

It is striking that Rosie focused on the human aspects involved: the words 'support' and 'duty of care' give an idea of the way in which she approached these issues. Anne, a professor in charge of research in her department, had to coordinate and organise resources and research funding, allocate study leave, write reports, chair committees, arrange seminars and oversee research students, on top of a full teaching load; as a result she told me: 'I've had to put my own research on the back

burner'. All the women reported a plethora of meetings and paperwork. The workloads and accompanying pressures were very similar at the old university.

The sheer amount of daily work involved in all the leadership roles was overwhelming and it was not surprising that the women felt it took 'too much time.' As a new leader, Megan felt she was not very good at distinguishing between 'delegating and dumping' and was concerned not to do too much of the latter; she wanted to 'do it properly' but ended up working at night and weekends and feeling, 'I can't cope,' similar to the women academics in Acker and Armenti's (2004) study. However, more experienced leaders had learned to delegate as a way of balancing operational and strategic aspects of their role. For instance, Carol delegated much of the operational work to trusted senior members of her department, although she traded this off against having 'less of a finger on the pulse'. Likewise, Marie had created a new senior team and worked out a division of labour, which freed her up to focus more on strategic issues: 'When you have to do a lot of things you prioritise but at the end of the day something has to give. You can't do everything.'

This contrasted somewhat with the situation at the old university, where prioritising and boundary setting were seen as more characteristic of men: 'It may be a gender difference,' as one woman observed; here the women leaders were shouldering the bulk of the responsibilities, corresponding to Deem's (2003) findings about a gendered division of labour among managers.

Strategic direction

At a time of transition into new managerial approaches, much time was spent in strategic planning and quality audits, which impacted on the women leaders at both universities (as in Morley, 2005); at the new university there was also the transition into university status, growing a research culture and ensuring the future financially.

For those in new roles in particular, considerable time was spent developing cultures and processes. For example, as dean of a new faculty, one of Marie's first tasks was to develop a strategic plan. She described in detail how she set about doing this and the processes that

she used, using an overall ‘strategy of collaboration,’ involving ‘big strategic discussions’ both within and between other faculties, and the development of new partnerships with the community and beyond, so that the faculty could grow and be ‘sustainable in the future.’ She was also starting to develop research in a previously teaching-led environment and meeting resistance from some staff, so she had to ensure that she was, ‘communicating to them more than you would normally do in a kind of routine, less transitional, situation.’ These were complex developments involving expert people skills.

Likewise, for Megan, leading a new research team involved: ‘developing a sense of identity, gathering together a disparate group... Strategically it was about conveying a sense of direction.’ This also included ‘line management and people management’ and these aspects were often in tension:

I didn’t enjoy it at all – hated it... I used to go home and cry. Being in that position of not knowing what we were supposed to be doing, that uncertainty affected everybody. I spent a lot of time giving hugs and tissues. I told myself, ‘This is a good thing but I don’t know what to do’...It taught me to be thick skinned, not to internalise everything.

The emotions involved in changes of this nature are strongly conveyed here, both from Megan’s point of view and those of her staff. In what was a largely female environment, showing emotions was acceptable. In contrast, at the old university several women talked about having to hide their emotions so as not to be thought weak, because of ‘embedded assumptions’ about gender. However, Wepner et al. (2003) in the USA argue that both female and male higher education leaders draw on emotional domains as an important dimension of their work.

At the old university, strategic planning and an audit culture were relatively new phenomena and there was great resistance to them; women leaders there were struggling with the introduction of a new managerial culture (Blackmore and Sachs, 2001) and ‘expectations of top down management not a bottom up collegial role,’ as one put it. New managerialism was more firmly embedded in the leadership work at the new university and experienced women leaders were familiar

and confident with strategic planning, often turning it to their advantage. For example, to Carol, ‘the saving grace is that you can be creative, take risks’; creative elements had been commented on positively at the end of a gruelling external audit which had had a highly successful outcome, and were evident in a range of international activities.

Rosie had also skilfully turned a quality review into a ‘great opportunity’ and a positive team building experience which she described vividly:

We had several staff development days. There was a lovely moment - the development plan wasn’t sparkling – it needed to come alive. All the lights came on round the room. Individuals did accounts as case studies – a very real lived experience.

Rosie was particularly pleased that the internal report ‘recognised...a sense of shared strategic directions...staff commitment, enthusiasm – overwhelmingly positive.’ However, although more positive aspects to quality audits were mentioned in the interviews than noted by Morley (2005), the onus on women leaders to succeed was certainly great. Rosie had felt under considerable pressure because of the emphasis on leadership in the review process: ‘It feels about me - the section in the report on leadership - it is my baby.’ This was an interesting, highly gendered image which was also used by Megan in her interview, summing up the deeply felt, personal sense of responsibility and ownership that these women had in relation to their leadership roles.

Financial planning

Challenges were also evident in relation to financial aspects of the role. As a business-oriented institution, financial management played a significant part of the women leaders’ daily and strategic work at the new university. For one of the deans, an economist, this was not a problem, but for others this was more of an issue. For example, Charlotte described how she had to develop ‘financial literacy’ when she took on the job: ‘It was hideous - really hard. Some people got very

angry because I was asking them to look at budgets...I had to win hearts and minds.’ Like women managers in the old university, Charlotte always balanced the human side alongside the financial requirements of a new managerial culture, but this created real dilemmas and concerns that she had to grapple with, as the following example illustrates:

A small number of people are on short term contracts – there could be redundancy. Because I know the people and know their personal situations ...On the one hand there’s a clear business case, you can be objective, but is there any duty of care?...If we are a Christian university, does it have any bearing on how we should act?...I feel so responsible as a head of department.

So although in one way, Charlotte had become ‘comfortable’ (her word) in dealing with budgets, she explicitly looked to the Christian foundation of the university to provide a wider framework of values: ‘it’s about thinking about people and their lives...not just about money.’

In another similar example, Carol said she felt ‘very, very uncomfortable’ when she had to introduce workload planning to her department and was required by her previous (female) line manager to use a top down approach, while she ‘was trying to implement it in the best way’ through more open conversations with staff: ‘It was a clash between two different management styles.’ A few years further on, she was more confident in her approach: ‘I’ve established principles...I have values-based reference points.’

In both these cases, tensions were created by new managerial requirements coming into direct confrontation with the more caring, collegial approaches which the women wanted to use. This could be seen, as characterised by other researchers (e.g. Deem, 2003; Morley, 2005), as masculinist attitudes confronting traditionally female ones. However, an additional dimension in the new university was the values-based ethos, underpinned by its religious foundation, which was very evident in daily conversations among academic staff, whatever their beliefs or lack of them, and explicitly referred to in some of the interviews as a reference point for leadership. Thus caring

was not just characterised as gendered but about a wider set of values that could be shared by both men and women (see also Wepner et al., 2003, who emphasise the moral basis of leadership).

Gendered leadership?

The examples above have led us into a consideration of the extent to which the women's leadership styles can be considered gendered or not. In Deem's (2003) study of manager-academics, both men and women described themselves as collegial and facilitative leaders, but there was often a gendered variation in style and emphasis. Likewise in this research, all the women talked about using an inclusive, collaborative approach, but the variation here was between women rather than between women and men. The most striking differences were between the two universities and the way in which the women leaders regarded their own leadership.

It was noticeable that women leaders at the old university, even those with great experience, described a tension and contradiction between caring and authority in highly gendered, somewhat stereotyped terms. As one put it, 'I'm good with people but it's also a weakness – a gendered aspect. Men have the capacity to stand back and manage.' This was a good example of the way that the women were ready to see themselves through others' (usually male) eyes, which undermined confidence in their own abilities, an example of the 'double-voiced' discourse (Baxter, 2011) used in a self-critical way. Because of their rare position in the old university, women leaders there felt isolated and considered that the qualities they brought to their roles were not only gendered but seen negatively in comparison with men. As a consequence, some tried to hide their feelings, as mentioned earlier, and several were reluctant and hesitant at being seen to be too authoritative.

In contrast, the new university women leaders had a less polarised view of leadership and spoke more confidently about their leadership style although, as we have seen, they also experienced tensions in relation to aspects of new managerialism and had to support their staff in relation to this. For example, Charlotte said, 'I've had to be

incredibly emotionally literate, keeping people together, keeping the boat steady’, but she also affirmed, ‘I’m confident enough to say, ‘It’s not right, I think it should be like this’...I don’t shy away from difficult things.’ Inclusive, people-centred approaches were seen as strengths and necessities in a climate of change, but so were strong visions and values; these were not seen in opposition. The women made quite a nuanced distinction between a top-down, authoritarian style and what they tended to describe as ‘direction’. For example, Carol said, ‘I give a sense of direction and mission, but I’m not controlling every decision.’

Similarly, Marie explained the mixture of inclusivity and clear direction that she used, which was very different from the top-down management style used by her predecessor. Marie’s and other women’s use of collaborative and decisive, focussed approaches skilfully blended traditionally female and male characteristics, creating distinctive leadership styles (as in Gerdes, 2010). There was a mixed reaction to this change of approach: while some staff welcomed the opportunity to share in decision making, others reacted by asking women leaders to be more controlling and tell them what to do. In Marie’s case, there was also some mistrust as she was the first woman to lead this subject: ‘It’s been a male dominated world. Having a female boss...some of my male colleagues are not at ease.’ Marie was aware of the additional factor of her nationality as she was born outside the UK, but she saw this as a positive advantage in an international arena and had a great deal of confidence in her own abilities. However, women from minority ethnic groups and developing countries are still likely to meet discrimination and be excluded from leadership positions (ECU, 2009; McNamara et al., 2010; Moosa, 2009).

Anne was also the first woman to take a senior role in her department – ‘it was quite a readjustment’ – but her subject had a strong tradition of successful women researchers elsewhere and her department was highly supportive. Anne saw herself as ‘diplomatic, facilitating. I help people achieve’ alongside being ‘efficient and organised.’ As she was in a research leadership rather than a management role, and ‘cannot direct others’ research,’ she used a more indirect way of working, through careful advance planning, which she

described using an analogy with chess playing. Thus, depending on their specific role and subject area, the women used variations in style to suit the micro-climates of their particular contexts, disciplinary cultures and academic ‘tribes’ (Becher and Trowler, 2001), which could not easily be characterised as gendered in a uniform way.

Anne could draw strength from the history of women’s accomplishments in her field, while Charlotte brought a specifically feminist perspective to her role. Charlotte noted the advantages of class interacting with gender – ‘it’s not just maleness, it’s background, cultural and social capital... Women in leadership roles usually have capital behind them, not just gender.’ Coming from a working class background had made her even more determined to succeed. It is important to acknowledge how factors such as age, class, ethnicity and sexuality interact with gender; these are discussed in more depth in other research than space permits here (e.g. Maguire, 2010; Morley, 2003).

Megan raised an additional gendered aspect: ‘It’s not just being a woman – it’s being a mother,’ but emphasised that this could be seen to be an asset, as ‘multi-tasking helped...stepping from one to another [role];’ she did not see this being done by men (see also Raddon, 2002). For Rosie, the institution enabled her to combine responsibilities effectively: ‘The job enabled me to be Mum. [The university] is flexible enough to juggle both. For me it’s the most important thing.’ Megan, Rosie and others interviewed were balancing leadership with caring for young families and dependents; their stamina and resilience were remarkable, but the skills, effort and exhaustion involved should not be underestimated (as in Acker and Armenti, 2004). It should also be noted, however, as other researchers remind us (Deem, 2003; Morley, 2005), that not all women are parents and that making such an assumption can reinforce traditional ideas about femininity and heteronormativity.

We can see from the above examples that there was considerable variation in the way that the women constructed their own position and leadership in the academy, from traditionally gendered ways to a wider construction, depending on their role, age, discipline and personal background. In general, more stereotyped perspectives were found at the old university, while women at the new university were blending

traditionally feminine and masculine leadership styles with greater confidence.

Conclusions and recommendations

Looking at the interview data overall, a number of findings stand out. As in Airini et al. (2011), there was a strong interaction between personal, professional and organizational factors. Firstly, in terms of organizational context and culture, there were greater promotional opportunities open to women at the new university compared to the older institution. Rosie's view, 'I've never felt the glass ceiling,' was shared by others; the new university women leaders felt generally encouraged by the greater number of women in senior positions and the support that they received from them. Female role models were a significantly positive factor, alongside mentoring and action learning sets, as other studies have found (e.g. Rosser et al., 2003; Wyn et al., 2000). These practices were also found to be useful and were beginning to be introduced in the old university, but as yet women leaders here were in the minority and there was not yet a coherent set of promotional procedures which enabled women to succeed.

Another striking finding was the strength of personal and professional identities in a supportive context. Given the difficulties of the economic climate, reductions in funding for higher education and substantial restructuring, it was remarkable how positive overall women leaders were about their demanding roles. All the women at the new university stressed the rewarding and enjoyable aspects of the role, such as colleagues working well together, a successful internal or external review, and positive feedback from colleagues and senior managers. This contrasted with the less positive perspectives of women at the old university, which were similar to findings from a study of women leaders in another new university (Fisher, 2007). It is therefore not possible to generalise about particular types of institutions, but it is important to recognize the power and influence of local organizational cultures in helping to construct personal and professional identity, alongside other factors.

A related key finding was the skill with which the women brought together inclusive and collegial approaches with direction and vision in

their leadership styles, in the face of the challenges of new managerialism (Blackmore and Sachs, 2001; Deem, 2003), thus blending traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics (Gerdes, 2010). As illustrated in some of the earlier examples, a strong sense of personal agency, together with embedded principles and moral values (as in Wepner et al., 2008), were evident in their accounts of daily activities and strategic decision making. I have argued that the underpinning values and foundation of the new university helped to put such approaches into a wider framework, so that caring, for example, was not seen as gendered as it was at the old university. Nevertheless, the negotiation of particular decisions and events was not uniform and differences between the women were evident, owing both to previous experience, personal background and disciplinary contexts.

As a range of other studies cited throughout have demonstrated, the position of women leaders in higher education globally is by no means secure, although steadily improving. Senior university leaders need to be aware, therefore, not only of the demands on all those in leadership and management roles, but also of the gendered attitudes and discriminatory practices still prevalent which may impact negatively on women. Positive practices such as those identified in this study may help to provide a less chilly climate for women aspiring to leadership roles, including: transparent promotional processes, leadership training and various forms of mentoring and coaching. Direct support from women who are already in leadership roles is also important in terms of providing positive role models, as we have seen.

Universities should not ignore the positive contribution that women leaders can make, at a time when increasingly the students are women. In the new university, where there were more women in senior leadership and management roles, this was beginning to become a reality. The role of (largely) feminist research in charting inequities and successes in women's academic leadership has been and continues to be of significant value; this study makes an important contribution to this field.

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Vivienne Griffiths is Professor of Education at the Faculty of Education, Canterbury Christ Church University.

Contact Address: Direct correspondence to the author at Faculty of Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Campus. Canterbury CT1 1QU
E-mail address: vivienne.griffiths@canterbury.ac.uk