Leadership challenges and opportunities experienced by international women academics: A case study in Australia

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Abstract

Scholarly articles on international academics have been weighted towards understanding their broad personal and professional challenges related to teaching. Limited research is conducted with international women academics in Australia in, especially, exploring their leadership-related challenges and opportunities. Using an intersectionality lens, this paper addresses this gap by exploring key related challenges and opportunities for international women academics in gaining leadership positions at Australian universities. It draws on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with seven international women academics. The findings contribute to the body of knowledge in exploring two major challenges faced by international women academics in Australia: 1) administrative-related interruption impacting their research performance; and 2) lack of understanding of university policies and processes. International women academics also cited the opportunities provided to them or gained by them for their overall professional growth at Australian universities. The practical implications of these findings for international women academics and higher education institutions are also considered.

Practitioner Notes

1. International women academics are provided with leadership position opportunities at Australian universities.
2. International women academics face leadership-related challenges due to differing university work culture compared with their home countries.
3. As women academics, they are resilient by taking full responsibility for learning local knowledge of university policies and systems as well as managing their time effectively in performing their roles efficiently.
4. Australian universities are in fact making efforts to provide the support needed by international academic leaders who also happen to be women.
5. International women leaders stressed the importance of having two mentors: one Australian and the other an international-origin academic.

Keywords

Leadership, challenges, opportunities, international women academics, Australia

Introduction

Higher education institutions globally have embraced international academics, who bring with them rich, diverse academic, research and leadership experience. The growth of international academics in Australia has been promising in recent years. Welch (2021) observed that Australia has one of the highest proportions of international academic staff "after Hong Kong and Israel, both well known for their highly diverse academic profile" (p.119). Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data, in 2019 there were nearly 30% (approximately 300,000 people) of staff members born outside Australia working in the Australian higher education and learning sector (ABS, 2020). Song and McCarthy (2020) report that in Australian universities around 15.4% of academic staff are Asian academics in teaching and research positions.

Australian higher education institutions attract international academics for the purposes of filling gaps in an aging professoriate (Welch, 2021), addressing a lack of succession planning (Loomes et al., 2019), improving international university rankings globally (Dowsett, 2020; Johansson & Śliwa, 2014; Larbi & Ashraf, 2020), attracting researchers capable of generating high-quality research outputs and for institutional accreditation purposes (Johansson & Śliwa, 2014). International academic mobility is considered inherently beneficial not only for the individuals who gain greater earning capacity (Balasooriya et al., 2014) but also for higher education institutions and student populations through exchanges of knowledge and know-how, mainly in teaching and research (Balasooriya et al., 2014; Larbi & Ashraf, 2020; Minocha et al., 2019; Singh & Chowdhury, 2021). For the purposes of this article, international academics are individuals born overseas, "educated and enculturated in one system of education and currently teaching and researching in another" (Walker, 2015, p. 61). All international academics in this study are settled migrants who have transitioned to Australian academia and have acquired residency via permanent residency or citizenship.

Although international academics are appointed to conduct teaching and research, as well as to perform administrative and service duties, numerous research studies on international academics are directed towards understanding their acculturation, teaching and research experiences (Balasooriya et al., 2014), mostly reporting on the challenges encountered. Given that scholarly articles on international academics are not specific in exploring leadership-related challenges and opportunities faced by women, this paper fills that gap with this research question: *What are the key related challenges and opportunities experienced by international women leaders at various Australian universities?* To the author's knowledge, this is one of the first papers that reports on international women academics' leadership experiences in Australia.

Leadership challenges and opportunities for women in academia

Historically, women academics have been disadvantaged in their career development in the higher education sector globally (Aiston et al., 2020). Women are underrepresented in the most senior ranks and leadership roles, which is both an international phenomenon and a social justice issue (Aiston et al., 2020). In Australia, while women represent more than 50% of the workforce, they are less likely to participate and occupy senior managerial roles than men (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Based on current statistics, 10,523 male academics were in a position above Senior Lecturer compared to only 5,919 female academics in a similar position (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Despite most of the literature on gender and higher

education leadership usually discussing how to get more women into leadership positions (Acker, 2014), there remain significant challenges faced by women in gaining managerial positions.

Previous scholars (e.g., Westoby et al., 2021) have discussed two leading barriers for women that result in their being deprived of their full career trajectory in academia. The first barrier relates to the greater role they play in domestic duties such as childcare, motherhood and carer responsibilities (Sang et al., 2013). In Egypt, women academics working in public universities have been reluctant and demotivated to accept leadership roles due to their responsibility for raising children and fulfilling other familial duties; given familial duties, they have limited time to manage their research and teaching, let alone to perform managerial roles effectively (Mousa, 2021). Women academics who give birth are penalised for taking maternity leave in Hong Kong and they are given higher teaching loads and roles when they return to work (Aiston et al., 2020). In the United Kingdom, Bhopal (2020) found that women academics who took two years' maternity leave (i.e., a career break) faced difficulties transitioning back to research work, especially lagging behind in publication numbers and keeping up with current research and networks in their disciplines. Consequently, women continue to be disadvantaged by having less time for research activities and in accepting administrative roles. In Australia, the latest research by Sharafizad et al. (2020) established that female academics combine their careers with their family responsibilities, leading to constant re-negotiation of the boundaries between family and work, while male academics compartmentalise their career as an entity on its own, separate from their personal – familial – lives.

While women academics have entered academia in large numbers, their role has historically revolved around teaching, and research has been predominantly associated with men (Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). Therefore, the second barrier is related to women's identity as teachers, and they are frequently tasked with teaching and student support roles, coupled with seemingly never-ending administrative tasks (Morley, 2014). Since early 2020, COVID-19 has exacerbated the 'teacher identity' issue, because teaching was conducted remotely, and the boundary between work and home was compromised (McGaughey et al., 2021).

Women are also portrayed as less qualified, devalued and misrecognised when it comes to being rewarded and promoted to leadership positions (Morley, 2014). Morley (2014) further argues that women are usually not strategically positioned in gaining pathways to leadership roles. Even if they are, Acker (2014) argued, "managerial positions held by the women in the study exhibited a fast pace of life, required long hours and [are] punctuated by the incessant demands of emails" (p. 78). In addition, these women leaders use their research time to meet teaching and administrative obligations.

Male colleagues, in contrast, are encouraged, supported and provided with more outward-directed roles, such as focusing on developing international networks, seeking external funding opportunities and strengthening international research collaboration. As a result, with the lack of similar research opportunities, women's research performance and productivity are on the decline, because research is implicitly associated with the pathway to academic seniority and is perceived as an indicator for promotion (Morley, 2014). Moreover, the pandemic has severely impacted women academics' research productivity due to substantial increases in childcare and housework burdens through school closures and consequent shift to 'home schooling' (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2021).

In overcoming these barriers, institutional support needs to be provided to female academics so that they are able to have the opportunity to strive in academia. For instance, career-related guidance needs to be provided to them: it is important to develop formal support structures for women

academics, ensuring that they receive adequate training for promotion and enjoy career-related support (such as assisting with applications and interviews, coaching), so that women academics too can reach their potential in the same way as men (Bhopal, 2020). Mentoring opportunities should also be offered to female academics by female academics who occupy higher positions. This role model support will allow women academics to feel empowered to resume administrative roles and achieve a successful career in academia (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016).

Intersectionality and leadership

Although women's international careers have been examined in traditional expatriation literature (Guo & Al Ariss, 2015), little is known about skilled migrant women's leadership experiences in Australia. There has been a misleading stereotype of women migrants as unskilled dependants who move countries following their spouses' careers (Kofman, 2000). However, these assumptions are untrue, since women migrants make up a majority of the workforce, especially in the nursing and teaching professions (Kofman, 2000). Much documented literature on skilled migrant women is weighted towards understanding their barriers to employment. These barriers include gender bias, as well as family structure and obligations (Guo & Al Ariss, 2015; Johansson & Śliwa, 2014).

Notably, a small number of studies draws attention to international women academics in leadership positions. Such academics in Johansson and Śliwa's (2014) study admitted that it was their personal choice not to take up senior leadership positions due to their having children or taking career breaks, rather than any institutional factors. These latter factors particularly impact on women's research excellence and productivity, where women publish less, receive smaller amounts of external funding and have higher teaching workloads compared to their male counterparts (Aiston et al., 2020). Hence, there are disproportionately low numbers of international women academics in senior positions in the United Kingdom, for example (Johansson & Śliwa, 2014). Bhopal and Chapman (2019) further argue that women international academics are assigned roles that are administrative and student-centered, and are less valued in terms of developing their research productivity. Therefore, it is not surprising that international academics who are mainly women remain in the minority group in being appointed to leadership roles at research universities (Sayler et al., 2019).

Interestingly, in China, Larbi and Ashraf (2020) observe that leadership appointments of international academics to deanships or directorships are often not easily attainable or are limited to certain disciplines such as the natural sciences, which are mainly dominated by male academics. These leadership positions are also exclusively reserved for domestic academics who are affiliated to the Chinese Community Party. International academics in China are thus deliberately confined to teaching and research activities and are "restrained in participating in the decision making of the institutional administration" (Larbi & Ashraf, 2020, p. 155). Guo and Al Ariss (2015) strongly argue that "women and gender relations in international migration are largely absent" (p. 1289) in the scholarly literature and more attention needs to be directed to examining the unique challenges facing migrant women (Johansson & Śliwa, 2014) in leadership roles in higher education institutions (Aiston, 2014).

Accordingly, the intersectionality lens is the concept adopted in this study to further understand the complexity of gender and migrant (international/cultural) identity of international women academics in leadership positions at Australian higher education institutions. Warner (2008) provides the following definition of intersectionality: "the idea that social identities such as race, gender and class interact to form qualitatively different meanings and experiences" (p. 454). A further important element of intersectionality is that each group interacts with each other to shape experiences and

manifestations which cannot be explained by membership in regard to only one group (Warner, 2008).

Given that academic articles are weighted towards understanding international women academics' barriers to gaining leadership experiences (Bhopal & Chapman, 2019; Johansson & Śliwa, 2014; Larbi & Ashraf, 2020), little attention has been paid to exploring challenges and opportunities gained by international women leaders in Australia using an intersectionality lens. Therefore, this study fills the gap and enriches the literature in the leadership space by asking: *What are the key related challenges and opportunities experienced by international women academics in gaining leadership positions at Australian universities?*

Research design and methodology

The hermeneutic phenomenology approach, developed by Heidegger, is utilised in this qualitative study to explore international women academics' experiences by providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (leadership) studied. The hermeneutic phenomenology approach has both elements of descriptions of experiences (phenomenology) and of interpretations (hermeneutic), and it is thus relevant to understanding the lived experiences of international women academics in regard to their leadership-related challenges and opportunities (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). The main focus is on understanding the meaning of their experiences by searching for themes, engaging with the data interpretively, but with less importance given to the essence of the experience (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). In short, it offers researchers the opportunity to explore, understand and interpret the lived experiences of research participants in regard to leadership-related challenges and opportunities.

International women academics with leadership positions at Australian universities in Melbourne (State of Victoria) were invited to participate in the research through a process of purposive sampling. The author established initial contacts with international women academics via publicly available information on universities' websites in Victoria. For example, information such as international academics' email addresses, qualifications, leadership positions and identity can be obtained from a university website that informs the public of the range and nature of the expertise offered by its academic staff. The author sent an invitation email with project information in the Participant Information Statement to international women academics who fit the criteria of being an international woman academic holding a leadership position in an Australian university. Those academics who were interested to participate in this study replied to the author's email. Upon agreeing to participate, the Consent and Withdrawal Forms were emailed to them. Academics were also selected using snowball sampling, where one who had consented to an interview was invited to suggest other staff members to participate (Minichiello et al., 2008). A combination of purposive and snowball methods, and including representation from diverse racial and professional backgrounds and a variety of leadership positions, enabled sufficient variation in the sample to obtain a broad, balanced range of responses to address the research question. The author ensured also strict adherence to the ethical elements of low-risk research projects stipulated by her own University's ethics committee. (The approval Human Ethics number is HEC18522.)

In total, seven international women academics agreed to be interviewed, of whom three were from Malaysia and one each from China, India, Nigeria and the United States. These women have held leadership positions for not less than one year (and possibly upwards of four years in the sample), in positions ranging from Head of a Research Centre to Program Director. There were one Professor, two Associate Professors, and four Senior Lecturers. Three international women academics were based at a Faculty of Business, Management and Marketing, two were from Faculties of Sciences, and one each was from a Faculty of Law and a Faculty of Fashion.

International women academics in this research were very concerned about not revealing their demographic information, such as the specific locations of their universities and their own employment histories through reports and publications. Therefore, this information has not been reported in this article in order to preserve their anonymity. Pseudonyms are also used for participants. In reporting qualitative comments, the following convention is used: IWA for international women academic, and interview number (i.e., IWA 1, IWA 2, etc.).

Data collection

In 2019, seven face-to-face interviews were conducted with the academics at three different universities in Melbourne. The interviews were conducted at the participants' university offices, and duration was between 20 and 46 minutes. Interview questions were open-ended and sought to elicit views and leadership experiences of these international women academics. The interview began with brief demographic questions, such as name, home-country nationality, leadership position(s) and length of time at the university, to elicit background information of the academic. Then the author posed broad questions relating to their academic career experiences in Australia, any challenges faced in leadership positions and opportunities gained by them while in their leadership roles. The probes or follow-up questions employed by the author in the interview include 'What do you mean by that?', 'Can you explain further?' and 'Can you give an example?', as proposed by Kvale (2007) and Patton (2002). These questions were to elicit experiences, perceptions, perspectives, feelings and knowledge relating to challenges and opportunities of the women academics (Patton, 2002). All interviews were recorded and transcribed by professional transcribers and were manually analysed by the author using a thematic analysis approach, as detailed in the next section.

Data analysis

Van Manen's (1990) method of thematic analysis is adopted in this study because it represents one of the most complete and popular hermeneutic methods that focuses on "understanding the meaning of experience (by searching for themes) with greater interpretative engagement with the data" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 109). Van Manen's (1990) description of thematic analysis is based on the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. He described the method as based on three approaches: 1) the holistic reading approach to achieve a holistic understanding of the phenomenon; 2) the selective reading approach, highlighting significant statements to formulate meanings; and 3) a detailed or line-by-line reading approach that looks at every single sentence. Langdridge (2007) argues that it not necessary to use all three approaches to analyse the text, but "it does seem sensible to supplement the holistic reading approach with either the selective or detailed reading approach" (pp. 123-124); accordingly the author here has used holistic and selective reading approaches to analyse the data, because this will "result in a good balance between part and whole reading and less likelihood of idiosyncratic interpretations that are beyond the data" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 124).

The first step was to read all the transcripts to gain an overview of the data, following the van Manen approach, and also to check the quality of the data to see if there were any gaps in the transcripts. The second reading was conducted to explore the data, in order to obtain a general sense of the data and to immerse the author in the data's content, so that the author was familiar with the depth and breadth of that content (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2008). Each time the author read the transcripts, the author developed a deeper understanding of the information provided by the participants (Creswell, 2008). The next step in analysing the data was to embark on the coding process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), where the author started by reading the transcripts and assigned key words or phrases on the right-hand margin that described what the participant indicated (Tesch 1990). A selective reading approach was then undertaken to establish which phrases represented the phenomenon under investigation (van Manen 1990) – in this case the leadership challenges and

opportunities experienced by international women leaders in Australia. While coding, the author continuously asked the question, "What statement(s) or phrases(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?" (van Manen, 1990, p. 93).

The next step was to group similar codes and redundant codes and reduce the list of codes to a smaller and more manageable number (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2008; Tesch, 1990). The author highlighted the quotes which supported the codes (Creswell, 2008; Tesch, 1990) with different coloured highlighters. As the coding process progressed, themes emerged and the analysis became more structured and organised (Ezzy, 2002) as the research question of this paper was addressed.

Findings

Data analysis revealed rich information on the dynamic challenges experienced and opportunities gained by international women leaders in Australian universities. Individual experiences were diverse and quotations used in this paper are reported verbatim. The findings are organized around the emergent key themes of challenges and then opportunities.

Challenges

Based on the analysis, there are two principal challenges experienced by international women academics in leadership positions. Firstly, international women leaders encountered substantial interruptions to their research activities. Secondly, international women academics had limited understanding of their university's policy and processes on how to perform their roles to the best of their abilities.

Disruption in research activities/outputs

International women leaders faced significant disruption to performing their research to an outstanding level and to publish extensively. Similarly, women academics in Morley (2014) found that, with successful appointment to a leadership position, they had less research time. In this research, as these women academics were newly appointed to their positions, they had firstly to adjust to the new working culture, coupled with completion of administrative tasks attached to their leadership roles. A Malaysian-born academic who was provided with two leaderships roles upon her appointment as a Senior Lecturer struggled to make space and time for her research. This was mainly due to the overload of administrative-related tasks and a differing workplace culture:

> *When I started my position at this university, I was immediately given two leadership roles. The culture of working is different and approach method is different from Malaysia. I had to learn fast. The roles are action positions related to managing teaching. This means I need to solve day-to-day problems, prepare documentation, reporting, and those sorts of things. So, the positions are time-consuming, because it takes away my research time, as I have several research projects in my pipeline. I do feel it. The research time is always being taken away for administration work and it is hard to manage my time. I might think, 'Tomorrow I will have time to do research', but then a number of emails will come in and that will create some need to prepare a report or provide some advice or things like that which will take time. It is hard to switch between research and administration work. It is not like teaching; I know I am engaging with students for that amount of time in a week. It is fixed, but not for research.* (IWA 3, Malaysia, Program Director role)

A Professor from the United States who was appointed to a leadership position as the Head of Department admitted that, although she was provided with appropriate research allocations, she was nonetheless unable to perform her research work due to the significant workload deriving from a university restructure:

> *I think it is the workload due to the restructure at this university. I was appointed into the position when I started at this department. I am also supposed to be doing research while being the head of department, but I do not do enough research work. I supposely have 40-50% time to do research – two days a week and I do not do that. Partly you need peace of mind to do good research. So that has been a problem for me.* (IWA 5, United States, Head of Department role)

Another academic from Malaysia, who is newly appointed as a Centre Director, admitted that, due to purely administrative duties such as planning and managing staff members, she has been left with no time to conduct her research. She juggles with this lack of time and finds it extremely difficult to perform her research work:

> *Because you are in a management role, your time needs to be spent on doing planning and managing staff members, and therefore you do not have time to do research. A lot of staff members who are in management roles, to keep their research work going, if they still have research funding, they will pay for Postdoc students to continue their research. Since I am still new in my role, I juggle and find it very difficult to do my research, as I would really like to be involved. You only have 24 hours a day, you have got to decide how you make use of it.* (IWA 7, Malaysia, Centre Director role)

Interview respondents have held leadership positions that demanded most of their time in heading departments and research centre roles and they held these positions immediately when they were appointed to their academic positions and for less than two years at their departments and universities. In addition to the timeframe factor in gaining the leadership positions, they emphasized that they were indeed provided – 'on paper' – with limited time to conduct research in their leadership roles due to management, administrative and workload issues that they faced, coupled with differing work culture compared with their home countries. They did not observe, however, as have respondents in previous studies (e.g., Johansson & Śliwa, 2014), that this research-related challenge is added to with family commitments and obligations.

Lack of awareness of university policy and process

The second challenge related to their lack of understanding of university policies and processes that could guide them in their roles. An international academic from India was appointed as the Program Director just after the university restructured. She received limited administrative support because she was unable to reach out to staff members who performed the role prior to her, and therefore she put in extra effort to understanding the tasks that came with the position. At one point, she was unhappy performing the leadership role due to the limited support provided to her:

> *We had no resources. For two years I just had to study and study about the discipline and the structure, the advisory boards and the nature of the students. It was a huge learning curve for me. There was also low staff morale because of the restructure. Some people were shifted into different departments, people were retrenched, so I had to work on all those things. I feel I do not want to do it anymore, because they do not provide administrative support. There is a lack of support.* (IWA 1, India, Program Director role)

An international academic from Malaysia did admit to struggling in managing two leadership positions when she was new to the university culture and its system of working. In the first year, she took the time to learn those university processes, procedures and guidelines which were relevant to the Program Director role. However, she had difficulty in balancing her time between teaching, research and administrative work:

> *I found it difficult to manage two leadership positions at the same time, especially when I just joined the university after coming from Malaysia. The way we do things in Malaysia is different than here, so I need to get used to the university system. So, I would say the first one-year was a kind of a learning time for me. So, I did struggle a bit, as I needed to manage my time between other responsibilities such as teaching, research and administrative stuff.* (IWA 3, Malaysia, Program Director role)

A Chinese-born international academic who had worked at a Chinese university faced a similar challenge of not understanding the university system and the workplace culture at her Australian university. She found the system complicated and beyond her comprehension because of its extreme difference from the Chinese university system:

> *Once I started to do my leadership role, I realised I did not understand the university's system, as it is quite difficult and complicated for me to understand, coming from China. I had to understand how the university system works and how people work at different paces.* (IWA 6, China, Program Director role)

Despite international women academics in this research having studied for their PhDs in Australia, they still had issues with understanding university policies and structures in performing their roles as leaders. Their lack of understanding of policies was not due to their English language proficiency, but rather was entirely due to a lack of administrative support, the greatly differing workplace system and culture, and the problem of managing time in order to complete other functions. As they were newly appointed to their roles, even though they had worked in other international universities, they encountered different policies and systems in managing their work in Australia.

Opportunities for professional development

The women academics also mentioned the opportunities provided to them or gained by them for their overall professional growth at Australian universities during their leadership roles: for instance, meaningful support from the university and mentoring opportunities that were offered.

Meaningful support from the university

These academics faced challenges while holding leadership positions, but they have also been supported by their departments and universities. One academic from Nigeria commented that the university had a duty of care to recognise the workload and cultural challenges faced by international women academics and to support them in overcoming those challenges that were unique to their circumstances. She observed, too, that the support mechanisms available had to be meaningful and should be provided in an inclusive and non-discriminatory way if they were to have a positive impact on leaders' professional lives:

> *There is a duty of care in the university to make sure that there is that recognition, and there is identification of the challenges that they might face and support them in overcoming those challenges, [because,] as international women academics we will say 'yes' to doing it, even though we have huge workloads. It has to be done in an inclusive non-discriminatory way for it to have*

any meaning and make any positive difference in the lives of these academics.
(IWA 2, Nigeria, Program Director role)

Reflecting that observation, it should be acknowledged that international women academics have fortunately experienced meaningful support provided to them. For example, a Program Director who came from Malaysia was supported by her school management in understanding her issues as a new staff member and it provided her with the time as well as space to discuss issues and limitations that she faced performing her role. She was also assisted by a casual staff member and advisors to undertake part of her leadership role so that she was able to focus on her research. Over time, she became ready to 'pass the baton' to someone else, because they might have new ideas about performing the role effectively:

> *Support was provided to me by the university via space to discuss our limitations, problems and sort out things. And the management really understood that I am a new staff member here and I need time to sort out things - so that was helpful. They also helped in getting a casual staff member as well as advisors to help me so that I can focus on my research. But I cannot wait to give these positions to someone else, as they may come up with more new ideas, innovations, and it will be time for me to move on to other things that I want to focus on, such as research.* (IWA 3, Malaysia, Program Director role)

A Malaysian-born Chinese engaged a professional coach approved by her School to assist her in transitioning to her new position and adapting her leadership style to suit the Australian workplace. She admitted that, being a Malaysian Chinese and a woman, she was trained in her culture to be humble, she was not encouraged to voice her opinion or to be assertive in conversation. She has realised that, as a leader from a different culture, she needs assistance in developing and strengthening her leadership skills:

> *[They should] provide necessary training and support for international academic researchers who want to go into management and to do well in management. For example, I have written to my School to support my coaching. I have a professional coach who I meet every couple of months, who coaches me in certain areas of my leadership skills. Being a Malaysian and being a Chinese, I was brought up in a very Chinese culture that you should be humble, you should not demand and you should just say yes. Do not say no. So, what I have learned is that we were not encouraged to voice our opinion, as it is considered disrespectful in our culture. It became very apparent later in my career, and I noticed that sometimes being in a meeting I should be a contributor to the meeting and be assertive. And when you say no, that means no.* (IWA 7, Malaysia, Centre Director role)

Interview respondents were very much supported by their university management teams to enhance their confidence levels to enable them to lead in a different academic environment. Though these international academics had themselves studied in Australia, they still needed assistance and university support systems to provide them with a safe platform if they were to thrive in their leadership roles, which were entirely new and untried.

Mentorship

Women academics in this research indicated that mentorship support was very important in guiding them in navigating their leadership roles in the Australian higher education system. Many observed

that they needed advice from two sources, one Australian and one from a migrant background, so that they were able to fall back upon and utilise differing perspectives in navigating their positions in academia:

> *With a lot of support from my Director of Teaching and my Head of Department, who were very supportive and they helped me a lot, I was mentored and I took the support, because I do recognise that I do not have every skill to manage my leadership role.* (IWA 1, India, Program Director role)

> *Mentorship is important. Probably you need actually two mentors as a migrant. One who is a migrant and the other one non-migrant, because they are going to offer you different perspectives.* (IWA 5, United States, Head of Department role)

> *I think it is good to have a highly skilled migrant and an Australian mentor who can support you and provide networks to you. Also, they will understand your challenges that you face. Even an Australian mentor could be good because they know the Australian information which will assist you.* (IWA 6, China, Deputy Program Director role)

Singh et al. (2009) found that "individuals with mentors report more positive career outcomes than those lacking a mentor" (p. 56). International women leaders in this study have acknowledged that they have received mentorship support from senior managers to better navigate their leadership skills. They have also indicated that it is vital for them to be mentored by two mentors: one Australian-born and the other a migrant. This is because these mentors are able to provide differing but complementary views, connections and local knowledge in navigating the academics' career trajectory at the leadership level.

Discussion

In the main, scholarly articles (Luxon & Peelo, 2009; Rao & Hosein, 2020) have focused on international academics' general experiences as well as teaching and research. This study contributes new empirical insights to the arguments relating to leadership challenges and opportunities experienced by international women academics in Australian higher education institutions. Using the intersectionality lens, it observes that such women have experienced significant challenges but also gained opportunities to perform well in their leadership positions. These leadership-related challenges and opportunities are intersected by their gender and migrant identities, especially their international and cultural identities, when they are working at Australian higher education institutions. They all gained leadership positions to gain administrative experience rather than relying only on teaching and research experience to ensure that their careers progressed.

Previous studies (Mousa, 2021; Su et al., 2015) have painted a gloomy picture of the range of personal and professional barriers that hinder women academics generally from gaining leadership positions in academia. In this research, international women academics, a subset of women academics at large, are indeed breaking the 'glass ceiling' by gaining leadership positions at Australian universities. However, this study has also discovered several challenges they experienced while in their leadership positions. One of the challenges is attributed to lack of time management expertise – and, indeed, lack of time itself – to perform the research activities from which they came and to which they will in all likelihood return. This is mainly caused by institutional factors such as administrative-related disruptions in their day-to-day schedules, a lack of administrative support and huge workload issues caused by any university restructure (and such restructures have become more common).

In addition, newness to the role of leader, with less than two years' leadership experience, and encountering differing academic cultures and ways of working compared to their home countries are factors that have impacted their research excellence trajectory. Drawing on the intersectionality framework, these findings demonstrate that as woman academic leaders they are faced with an immense administrative task in such circumstances. This is supported by Bhopal and Chapman's (2019) findings that women academic leaders are provided with more administrative work and student-centred roles, which in turn hinder their ongoing research performance. Women academics are much more meticulous in their leadership performance and they put considerable effort into their work, as well as taking on full responsibility in performing their role to the best of their ability (Angervall, 2018).

As international women academics, they face another layer of challenge in that they have to adjust swiftly to working at a foreign higher education institution where the workplace culture is unfamiliar to them. While they are allotted time to do research alongside their teaching and administrative functions, the women interviewed here acknowledged that their leadership roles did take away their research time and thus hindered their research performance. A similar trend was also acknowledged by international academics, again mostly women, in Morley et al. (2018, p. 548), who observed that "they have lost research and publication opportunities", because they were more focused on student support, teaching and administration. That is, there was a price to be paid in the meticulousness they applied to their duties and the sense of responsibility they assumed.

In this research, none of the interviewees mentioned their family duties or having career breaks as disruptions to their research pathway. These have been reported by previous studies (Aiston et al., 2020; Johansson & Śliwa, 2014). These women did not mention having young children or carer responsibilities at the time of data collection; again this was similar to Sang et al.'s (2013) research. Therefore, these were not the main reasons they themselves offered for not performing their leadership roles to the best of their ability. International academics do indeed tend to undertake all their duties with a strong sense of commitment and without complaint, as was reported in recent research by Singh (2021). However, the research-related barrier – what their future careers will be – has imposed a cost on these women academics in managing their research time efficiently while holding leadership positions. By way of comparison, Singh's (2021) research found that male international academics have continued to have outstanding research publication track records while also holding leadership positions. Further research is recommended to investigate how these male international academics are able to use their time effectively and efficiently while also being leaders in the university. It can also be asked why women seem to accept as given barriers such as family and caring, even though these, which certainly must exist for some, are not made explicit during interviews in this study.

The second challenge faced by international women academics in this research is their unfamiliarity with university policies, procedures, processes and systems, similar to Saltmarsh and Swirski's (2010) findings. Minocha et al. (2019) argued that "extant literature does not delve in detail into the role of international academic staff in shaping institutional policies and practices" (p. 945), because of the unfamiliarity of the university systems, which are foreign and new to them. In this study, international women leaders faced work-related issues relating to unfamiliar institutional practices due to their own international identity. As international women academics they had worked in different countries and had experienced diverse academic cultures, yet in Australia they were also confronted with work-related issues in better understanding their new leadership roles. They were baffled by differing university systems, policies, regulations, processes and the Australian workplace culture. As women academics, they were determined to meet this challenge and took full responsibility for learning local knowledge of university policies and systems and practices that were

in place to assist them in performing their roles efficiently, which confirms the work of Sang et al. (2013) on international women professors who were highly motivated to strive and thrive in their positions. Universities are not all of a piece, and neither are their cultures or their systems.

International women leaders have also indicated that, due to university and department restructuring, they have received less administrative support from those colleagues who had previously performed the same role, as either the latter were made redundant or had moved to other positions (and perhaps had no wish to revisit their own experiences). As a result, they took a substantial amount of time to learn the tasks related to performing their leadership roles effectively, but at the expense of their research and teaching time. For that reason, some female academics in Mousa (2021) felt demotivated towards accepting senior administrative positions, because their teaching load remained the same and they were afraid of not having the ability to effectively manage their time to devote to their academic responsibilities.

Even though international women academics have faced challenges in their leadership roles, they have also had opportunities to grow in their position with meaningful support from within the university, such as upper management personnel support and guidance from professional coaches, as well as formal mentors. This is a sharp contrast to Rajendran et al.'s (2017) findings that pointed to a significant lack of leadership initiatives from university management in supporting international academics, especially women, in Australian higher education workplaces.

In this study, it is argued that international women academics are highly likely to take on more work, despite having high workloads, due to their cultural practices of not refusing to accept any work that comes their way. As Angervall (2018) observed, women academics do take on more administrative tasks but, in this study, challenges faced by international women leaders are also intersected with their cultural identity and practices. An Australia-based study (Thomas & Malau-Aduli, 2013) found minimal evidence of a systematic school-based or institutional approach to support international academics in guiding their professional lives. Hence, meaningful support systems need to be extended to international women academics to recognise their unique issues and assist them in navigating their work-related challenges in a new academic environment. Fortunately, according to this present study, Australian universities are indeed making efforts to provide the support needed by international academic leaders who happen to be women. The international women academics interviewed here were appreciative of the assistance provided by their managers at their faculties. These managers have not only provided a safe platform for them to convey aloud – that is, to 'voice' – their issues and challenges, they have also offered solutions, such as hiring casual staff members to assume at least some administrative-related responsibilities.

The cultural dimensions remain significant. One senior academic admitted that her cultural up-bringing was one of being non-assertive and humble and that this had hindered her leadership performance as a Centre Director. Being aware of this cultural-related vulnerability, she requested her manager to support her in gaining a professional coach to help her navigate towards more useful leadership skills in an Australian academic setting. Similarly, international academics in Minocha et al.'s (2019) study propose ongoing, consistent support mechanisms from host institutions, such as 'buddy' schemes or ongoing dialogue with the wider academic community, as opposed to one-off staff induction programs or events, in order to ease their transition and integration into their position at their new, host institutions.

The majority of international women academics in this study have received support from their mentors, either from within or outside the university, to guide and support them as leaders, teachers and also as researchers. This finding is a sharp contrast to Angervall (2018), where it is observed

that men do obtain research-related support, contacts and ideas from their male mentors that enable them to excel in their academic career, which is not the experience of women academics. As a result, international women academics in this study indicated that was important to have two mentors: one Australian and the other an international-origin academic. Australian-born mentors are important in providing international women academics with local professional support, such as directing them towards gaining relevant resources and knowledge, as well as offering guidance in navigating their career path in academia (Thomas & Malau-Aduli, 2013). However, international women leaders have also suggested that it is important for them to be guided by an international academic mentor. As Bhopal (2022) observes, international academics gravitate towards other international academics who can report similar experiences, and they thus feel included and accepted in the network without a sense of being judged. They then receive emotional and academic support as well as feeling safer voicing their issues.

International women leaders, in this study, further expressed the view that international academic mentors are able to provide diverse perspectives around progressing in their academic career, point them to access extensive research networks, and improve as well as strengthen those leadership skills that are pertinent to the Australian higher education workplace culture. As Howe-Walsh and Turnbull (2016) argue, it is important to have inspiring women leaders support to develop women academics towards positions of seniority.

Johansson and Śliwa (2014) argue that in academia senior positions are significantly male-dominated, "despite women forming a considerable part of the academic workforce" (p. 22), and therefore this present study's findings have significantly contributed to the literature on understanding the leadership experiences of international women academics at Australian universities. As Welch (2021) observes, "it is likely that many senior positions will be filled by international academics" (p. 118) especially from Asia, given the growing importance with this region – and many of those will be women.

Conclusion

International women academics in this study are appreciated and recognised by Australian universities, which is demonstrated in their being provided with considerable opportunities to take on leadership positions based on their excellent contributions in teaching, research and service to their university. Though international women academics have faced numerous leadership-related challenges, such as lack of time to accomplish their research activities and their unfamiliarity with university systems, policies, processes and procedures, they have also been provided with or have gained professional opportunities, such as meaningful support from their department leaders, training and development assistance, and guidance from mentors of complementary backgrounds and experience. The findings of this study have gone beyond the current literature on international academics that are weighted towards understanding their general and teaching-related lived experiences. This study has significantly contributed to and filled the gap in the literature in revealing not only challenges faced by international women academics but also opportunities gained by and provided to them to excel in their leadership positions in academia.

Given that the research findings are based on a relatively small-scale qualitative study, it is important to note that the emergent themes of challenges and opportunities are neither definitive or comprehensive: they reflect the lived experiences of international women academics drawn from varied Australian higher education institutions, but mainly in Victoria in Australia. Hence, they are not generalisable, as they do not represent the lived experiences of all international women academics in Australia. Future studies should consider the inclusion of a larger sample size of international women academics through a more strategic sampling approach with a focus on

triangulation. A quantitative approach that enables the examination of larger international women academics' population in relation to their leadership-related challenges and opportunities in Australia should be considered. A comparative study with Canada, the United States and United Kingdom is also recommended, because the findings and discussions will have relevance globally given that the international women academic population is also growing in these countries.

There are a number of important practical implications that arise from these findings for international women academic themselves and for Australian higher education institutions. The experiences of these academics suggest that a meaningful platform to network with other women is important to assist them in transitioning into their leadership role more smoothly. Having this platform will create a sustainable cycle for mentoring other international women academics in order to be inspired to pursue leadership positions, as well as act as an in-built support system to assist them navigate their roles successfully. Further recommendations for Australian higher education institutions to celebrate international women in academic leadership positions may include formal, on-going and sustainable support systems for them to facilitate their transition into leadership positions so that they are able to thrive in their new roles. Training and development programs and active mentorship guidance are vital factors for international women academics to foster their leadership capabilities.

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