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A Review of Higher Education Leadership in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This paper aimed to find answers to two questions through a review of literature: (a) What are the factors leading to the current ineffective leadership in Saudi higher educational institutions, and (b) How can this situation be rectified, especially within the implementation of the Vision 2030 programmes? A search of 10 pages of Google Scholar using search terms relevant to the topic yielded 23 papers for review. The answer to the first question- female leaders face more barriers, challenges, and obstacles compared to male leaders in Saudi higher education institutions. Cultural, social, organisational, and personal factors affect their elevation to leadership positions. Sometimes, due to overriding family pressures and the inability to find a work-life balance, some female leaders leave their positions and revert to the role of homemakers. Although many reforms have been implemented by the Saudi government recently to increase the contribution to the economic growth of the country through the Vision 2030 implementation, much more need to be done. The answer to the second question is- Reforms and policies aimed at increasing the participation of women in economic activities need to continue more vigorously. Leadership training and mentoring of female leaders are required to achieve this. These answers are applicable for both categories of papers.

Keywords: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Introduction

Effective leadership is crucial to the success of academic institutions depends upon effective leadership. On the other hand, no secret formula exists to create a successful leader and guarantee success. This is because many factors determine the formation and functioning of an effective leader in higher education. According to Buller (2013), an effective leader will be a positive leader creating positive relationships, climate, and communication.

The recent reforms in higher education in Saudi Arabia, under Vision 2030 (Saudi Arabia, 2021), were aimed at achieving world-class standards for Saudi universities. However, the method to achieve it is still unclear. With the reform in higher education in Saudi Arabia, there is an great desire to achieve world-class standards. However, there is a lack of adequate understanding of what has to be done to achieve that. Particularily, Saudi universities still struggle with a lack of effective leadership to promote creativity, innovation, and collaboration (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). Even with the establishment of the Academic Leadership Centre in 2009 by the Ministry of Higher Education had not been able to achieve much progress in this regard. There is a common assumption that a good researcher or teacher with long experience is an effective leader. Selection of heads of departments and higher educational institutions is done on this basis. As they are already leaders, they do not feel the necessity to learn leadership (Gonaim, 2019).

A related aspect is female leadership. According to UNESCO data, in higher education, the female enrolment ratio was 73.6 compared to 67.9 for males in 2020 (UNESCO, 2022). E-learning facilitated women's education by giving them access to higher education. Many Saudi women study abroad to overcome the cultural barriers in Saudi Arabia. As in many other countries, the rise in educated women and female faculty is not accompanied by the proportion of women in higher education leadership. The need to expand the leadership capacity and effectiveness of women leaders in the higher education sector was also stressed.

Female participation in the Saudi labour force has been increasing from 20% to 33% in two years 2018 to 2020, especially among women over 40 years of secondary education. Reforms allowing women to drive in 2018, stoppage of gender segregation in restaurants in 2019, and changes in the laws requiring a male guardianship for women going out of home, have contributed to higher women's employment. Due to the increased intake by the private sector, female employment grew from 68% to 76% from 2018 to 2020 (Ng, 2021). Saudization is being implemented using Saudi women to substitute repatriates. However, their wages and various perks are lower than those for men, the gap widening as the job level and salaries increase. There is a trend in recruiting younger women for top positions (Akeel, 2021).

This paper reviews the above issues in greater detail, especially concerning the implementation of Vision 2030. Thus, the research questions for this review are-

a. What are the factors leading to the current ineffective leadership in Saudi higher educational institutions?
b. How can this situation be rectified, especially within the implementation of the Vision 2030 programmes?

METHODOLOGY

Google Scholar pages were searched using appropriate search terms to identify papers relevant to this review topic. Both full texts and abstracts (if they contained the relevant information) were included. Only the papers published in the English language were selected. This process resulted in the final selection of 23 papers. These papers are reviewed in the following sections.

RESULTS

Frequencies of the selected papers by their years of publication

The frequency distribution of the selected papers by their years of publication is given in Fig 1.

As shown clearly, the number of papers published in 2017 was maximum (seven by count). There were three papers each in 2015 and 2018 also. One paper was published in 1982.
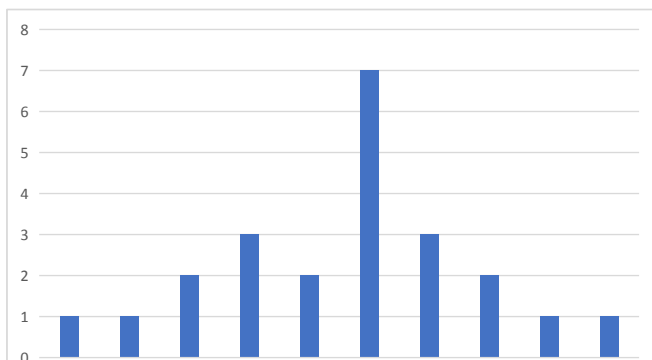

Fig. 1: Years of publication of selected papers

Fig. 2: Types of papers

Type of paper

The frequencies of types of papers in the selected ones are given in Fig 2.

From Fig 2, it can be seen that research papers numbering 13 out of 23 were maximum. There were five review papers, two book chapters, two doctoral theses, and a discussion/conceptual paper.

Thematic analysis of the selected papers

The reviewed papers were categorised into general leadership issues of Saudi higher education institutions and those dealing with female leadership issues in the same context. The frequency of papers in the general category is shown in Fig 3.

There were only seven papers in the general category. Out of these, two each dealt with the themes of servant leadership and leadership training and performance aspects. The remaining three papers were distributed one each into the other themes as shown in Fig 3.

The frequency of papers in the female leadership category is shown as a pie diagram in Fig 4.

Six out of 16 papers dealt with the themes of obstacles, challenges, and barriers. All other factors combined were dealt
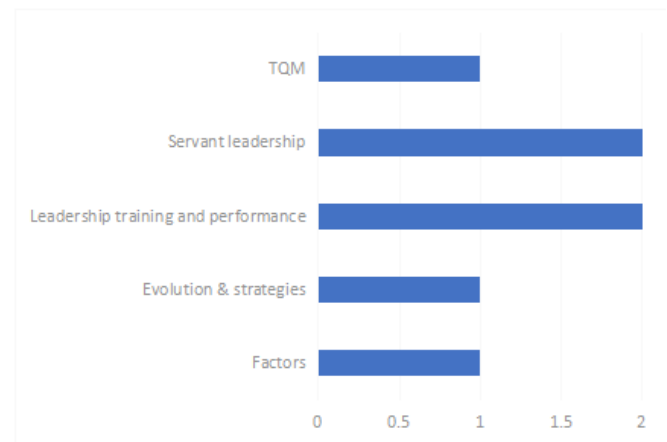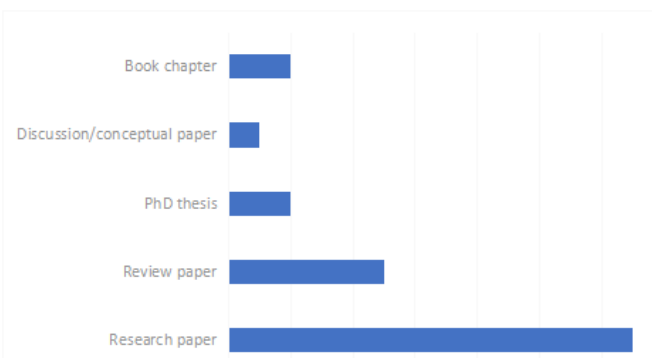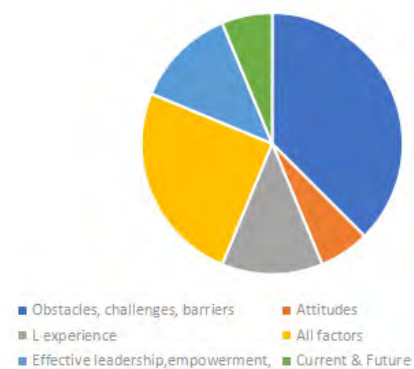

Fig. 3: Themes of General papers

Fig 4: Themes of female leadership Papers

with in four papers. The themes of leadership experience and effective leadership and performance were dealt with in two papers each. One paper each dealt with the themes of attitudes and current and future trends.

Now, descriptions of the papers included in the two categories of general and female leadership are given in the two sections below.

Description of the selected papers

The work of Gonaim (2019) was limited to the level of department heads. Servant leadership was found most effective but with many disadvantages related to work performance and management of the department.

Leadership in Saudi higher education institutions in general

Strategies were suggested by Al-Swailem and Elliott (2013) for building strong institutional leadership types to take the Saudi higher education sector into the future. In this respect, the Academic Leadership Centre, established by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2009, has an important role to play. Pedagogical leadership in the early years of the 20th century in Saudi Arabia had evolved through different leadership approaches. In the early years, the quality of the educational organisations was highly influenced by the quality of leadership and management with a mature understanding of children and families. There was also distributed leadership, in which leadership roles and responsibilities were shared and distributed among staff. In the case of pedagogical leadership, where leaders were responsible for creating a learning community, responsibilities were distributed among children, parents, teachers, and the community. A small number of formal leaders in the settings of the early years practised the full role of leadership: forming the vision and mission, making all types of decisions without limitation, and flexible in building relationships, and freely involving others in the school's decision-making. In the research leading to the above conclusions, semi-structured interviews were conducted by Alameen, Male, and Palaiologou (2015) with eight female leaders of the chosen settings. The sample size of eight may be small for generalisation.

A survey of deans and department chairmen in two Saudi universities (Athubaity, 1982) failed to pro-vide significant differences in the perceptions of leadership behaviour of deans within a university. But some variables of perception showed significant differences between the two universities.

The contextual factors affecting leadership practices and development in Saudi Arabia were discussed by Dirani, Hamie, and Tlaiss (2017). Historical, geographical, and economic overviews of the country about leadership practices were presented. The cultural, economic, political, and other social aspects affecting leadership and leadership development were also discussed with examples of how leadership practices are reflected in different sectors.

Results of a survey of Saudi higher education employees by Gorondutse, Abdullah, and Rogo (2018) showed role ambiguity to be a significant moderator of the relationship between leadership styles with employees' performance, but not the relationship between training and employee performance in the higher education sector of Saudi Arabia. There was a negative influence of role ambiguity on the relationship between leadership and employee performance. Thus, the reduction of role ambiguity in Saudi higher educational institutions becomes important.

To make the Saudi higher education system competitive with globally leading educational systems, improving the leadership in the Saudi higher educational institutions is imperative. In this respect, the perceptions of higher education leaders on servant leadership style, and their practices of power and authority were investigated (Shafai, 2018). Interviews with ten departmental chairs revealed that these leaders lacked leadership education and training. They were not familiar with various leadership styles including servant leadership. There was a weak association between servant leadership and Islamic principles. These leaders perceived formal authority as the sole means of power and control. Formal authority complemented moral authority. Servant leadership was found to be the most appropriate leadership style for Saudi higher education institutions. The shift from traditional to servant

leadership needs to be gradual to avoid any problems.

The paper by Aldaweesh, Al-Karaghouli, and Gallear (2013) provided the details till the stage of the collection of data for the identification of the most relevant leadership practice to improve the quality and ranking of Saudi universities. Data were collected from four major universities with regards to the ranking and establishment's age, mainly through semi-structured interviews, supplemented by observations and document analysis. In this study, only transitional and transformational leadership styles were considered to implement TQM in Saudi higher education institutions. The results and conclusions were to be reported after the analysis of the data.

Female Leadership In Higher Education Institutions

In Saudi culture, gender segregation in public places still exists, although there had some recent reforms in this direction. In such a male-dominated society, female leadership is very rare to find. Three papers dealt with the issue in great detail. In the paper by Alomair (2015), major barriers to achieving female leadership have been reviewed. Gender-based social, organisational, and personal level barriers have been reported by many workers. Obstacles exist even in the case of female employment. These are unconscious bias, lack of confidence and fear of failure, in-group favouritism, and difficulty balancing the demands of family and work. The same obstacles exist in the case of women achieving leadership positions also. Centralized decision-making processes, exclusion from strategic planning, lack of empowerment, and limited authority were reported in the case of Saudi women. The Saudization programme and absence of a leadership development process have led to many women occupying leadership positions in both public and private organisations without adequate leadership skills. Attitudes towards women in the workplace shy them away from active participation in responsible jobs. As more women are enrolling in higher education, the required technical competencies can be achieved. Still, they need leadership development programmes.

A later review, Alsubaie and Jones (2017) noted that Saudi women have made some progress in achieving employment and leadership positions in the higher education sector despite complex social, religious, cultural, and organisational barriers, breaking through the glass ceiling. The percentage of female enrolment in higher education outnumbers that of males as was shown by the UNESCO data above.

However, in the Saudi higher education sector, against 33 directors, 128 vice-presidents, 330 deans, and 542 deputy deans of faculties in the case men, there was only one director, 12 vice-presidents, 61 deans, and 228 deputy deans the case of women in 2017. Barriers to increasing female leadership are the same as those given by Alomair (2015). The authors suggested some new research directions on the impact of policies and reforms for higher participation of women, unbiased studies on Islamic texts on gender aspects, the exact role of gender segregation on female employment chances, and detailed studies on the impact of the recently changed laws related to male guardianship system and women driving, a detailed examination of social attitudes about women's role limited to the family, various types of discriminations against women and the impact of Vision 2030 reforms.

The education sector is the largest employer for Saudi women where women might face minimum barriers to rising to leadership positions. The Saudi government has recently introduced many reforms under Vision 2030 to directly impact women's empowerment. In this connection, a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with Saudi women working in Saudi higher education institutions by Alghofaily (2019) revealed the possibility of more positive outcomes from using direct references toward women empowerment in government policy statements in lowering barriers to women's rise to leadership positions.

The results of interpretive analysis of semi-structured interviews with female managers of the Saudi higher education sector by Abalkhail (2017) revealed that women face several challenges, which prevent them from achieving equitable representation in leadership positions. On the other hand, they have some opportunities that also help them in their careers. Some macro factors trickle down to the organisational level to shape the organisational process and practices impacting women accessing leadership positions. The socio-cultural background is an important factor in studying women in management in the Saudi context.

The responses to the surveys on Saudi female faculty members obtained by Asubaihi (2016) in her doctoral thesis indicated the existence of cultural and organisational challenges for women leaders in Saudi Arabia. Lack of empowerment and personal challenges ranked third and fourth in importance. Recommendations to decentralise decisions, formation of formal and informal women professional networks, increased mentoring, training, and development programmes for leadership positions, and increased participation of women in leadership conferences, job rotation, and secondment in other universities were recommended to address these issues. Some recommendations for future research were also made.

Using a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews with former department chairs, current department chairs and faculty members using vignettes to avoid biases, Gonaim

(2016) enumerated various leadership characteristics for effective leadership. Although Saudi Arabia uses a centralised system for leadership, a tendency toward more collaborative leadership to promote collegiality and collective interest was also noted. Specific recommendations were made to better prepare department chairs for such leadership positions in higher education institutions.

A review by Alsubhi, Hoque, and Razak (2018) showed that female leaders in higher education generally experience varied challenges at socio-cultural, organizational, economical, and personal levels. Additionally, they encountered eight workplace berries including gender-based stereotypes, work-life conflict, self-imposed constraints, social network limitations, biased organisational policies, non-gender-based discrimination, inadequate qualification, and minimal existing representation. These points almost summarise the factors identified by other researchers. These challenges and barriers affected the job performances of the women leaders adversely and led to conflicts with the male leaders.

On a positive note, Alotaibi, Cutting, and Morga (2017) observed that although there are many obstacles for Saudi women to achieve leadership positions, considerable scope still exists for them to become leaders in the social, political, and economic spheres. In Saudi Arabia, women first joined the consultative assembly in 2013 and they were appointed as deputy chairpersons of related committees in the same year. In 2015, women voted and ran for office in the municipal elections. These developments indicate good progress in terms of the willingness of organisations to allow more Saudi women to occupy managerial positions. In one study, women executives provided descriptions for female leaders as multi-tasking, emotional, strong, intuitive, compassionate, relationship-oriented, consensus-based, collaborative, and gossipy, and a different list of adjectives to describe the male leader as strong, intelligent, powerful, dominant, assertive, focused, stubborn, and single-tasking. Strong women leaders possess some of these masculine leadership characteristics. Female leaders are more relationship-oriented, inter-personal, democratic, and people-based. Male leaders are more task-oriented and hence more assertive and directive. The working styles of these two genders also differ substantially. Since the dominating leadership style is masculine, the easiest way for female leaders to be effective is to adopt some of the masculine leadership characteristics. The nurturing, sensitive, empathetic, passionate, caring, and cooperative, less hierarchical, more cooperative and collaborative, and more oriented to enhancing others' self-worth make female leaders excellent. Most leadership behaviours enhancing corporate performance were utilized by women more than men in team management. Some early reforms for women during 2003-2005 and their impacts were also discussed in this paper.

Some positive trends in attitudes toward women in leadership positions were observed by Alfawzan (2017) in a survey of faculty and students of two Saudi universities and community members. But this shift from the traditional attitude was much slower. Policy reforms, mentoring programs, networking opportunities, leadership training, and professional development were recommended.

Results of interviews with Saudi female professionals (Hodges, 2017) showed that they faced religious, cultural, and organisational challenges to become leaders. The relationship of women to self, others, place, and work significantly influenced their perceptions and experience of leadership. A review of promotion policies to reduce inequality was recommended.

Aimed to investigate the leadership effectiveness of female leaders in higher education in Saudi Arabia, Akram, Murugiah, and Arfan (2017) used a literature review to highlight that Saudi females are facing many challenges in their job due to cultural changes. They have different leadership behaviour, aggressiveness, and future orientation. If there is government support to provide security and facilities at workplaces, the effectiveness of the Saudi female leaders will increase.

Saudi women in leadership positions are facing a different reality from their male counterparts due to organizational, personal, and cultural challenges that impede their effectiveness as leaders. Findings of a survey of 106 female leaders (Al-Ahmadi, 2011) showed structural challenges, lack of resources and lack of empowerment as the main challenges and cultural and personal challenges ranked last, against the common perception.

Although Saudi woman still suffers from a lot of obstacles, cultural change, societal transformation, increase her education, skills, employment, and technological developments that reduce the impact of lack of experience and knowledge and increase their chances of success in leading organizations. Interviews and surveys were used in this doctoral thesis (Kattan, 2015).

To explore Saudi female leaders' experiences in leadership roles in Saudi higher education, Alqahtani (2021) conducted interviews with five female academic leaders. The female leaders' desire for advancement was low and contradictory due to internal factors created by themselves. Their conscious decisions were generated by external factors associated with their societies' and organizational practices. Some of them gave up leadership roles for their family responsibilities in response to a society that wanted them to meet their family obligations first. Many women had the appropriate qualifications and skills and ambition but were concerned that their leadership position would adversely affect their personal and social commitments. One major distinguishing aspect of life for Saudi females was the traditional and religious values that supported a conservative approach to female advancement. These values often led to cultural dilemmas of a difficult choice

between pursuing a career or following a traditional domestic path to ensure familial and social harmony. Saudi universities need to formulate appropriate plans to effectively encourage females in academia to seek advancement and investigate the institutional challenges affecting their career advancement. Saudi higher education needs to address and minimise the challenges and barriers encountered by women by assisting them in navigating their family obligation. Policies to reduce the pressures on female faculty members need to be formulated to provide them with a better work-life balance. The sample size of five is too small for making such far-reaching conclusions by the author.

A review by Alsubhi, Hoque, and Razak (2020) showed that most of the works highlighted that Saudi women in higher education faced familial, social, and organisational barriers in pursuing their leadership duties. These barriers lower their performance. For the greater economic benefit of women's empowerment, the Saudi government needs to reshuffle the organizational setup with suitable changes in the political, cultural, and socioeconomic policy.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to find answers to the following two questions through a review of literature-

a. What are the factors leading to the current ineffective leadership in Saudi higher educational institutions?
b. How can this situation be rectified, especially within the implementation of the Vision 2030 programmes?

The review showed that female leaders face more barriers, challenges, and obstacles compared to male leaders in Saudi higher education institutions. Cultural, social, organisational, and personal factors affect their elevation to leadership positions. Sometimes, due to overriding family pressures and the inability to find a work-life balance, some female leaders leave their positions and revert to the role of homemakers. Although many reforms have been implemented by the Saudi government recently to increase the contribution to the economic growth of the country through the Vision 2030 implementation, much more need to be done.

The positive factors are the higher enrolment of women than men in higher education institutions and the readiness of private organisations to employ women in top positions through the Saudization programme. Many women have also become political leaders. Hence, this is the right time to push forward a well-defined agenda for an increased presence of female leaders in higher education institutions. Leadership training and mentoring of female leaders are required to achieve this.

Leadership training and development are core issues in the general situation also. Servant leadership is considered the most preferred style for higher education in some papers.

However, there was no research on comparing different leadership styles for performance and determining the most desirable ones.

More research is required on general issues and the impact of Vision 2030 on female and male leadership issues and performances.

Limitations

Even after searching ten pages of Google Scholar, only 23 papers could be selected. This means, that much more research is needed in the field of issues related to leadership in Saudi higher education institutions.

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