SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS IN A CHANGING CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT. Women are under-represented in leadership positions in South African higher education institutions, and tend to be clustered in the lower ranks. In this study, 22 women leaders in South African higher education were interviewed to ascertain their perceptions of their professional development needs. The areas most strongly prioritised were those relating to finance, strategic planning, organisational politics and academic research. There was also a strong demand for organised peer support structures. Results are discussed with reference to the literature, on higher education leadership and in relation to the South African socio-historical context. Finally, implications for the design of a professional development program are discussed.

FEMMES SUD-AFRICAINES CHEFS DE FILE EN ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR : BESOINS EN PERFECTIONNEMENT PROFESSIONNEL DANS UN CONTEXTE EN ÉVOLUTION

RÉSUMÉ. Les femmes sont sous-représentées dans les postes de leadership des établissements d'enseignement supérieur de l'Afrique du Sud et elles se retrouvent généralement dans les échelons inférieurs. Dans le cadre de la présente étude, 22 femmes chefs de file au sein de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique du Sud ont été interviewées en vue de confirmer les perceptions de leurs propres besoins en matière de perfectionnement professionnel. Les points fortement priorisés sont les domaines associés à la finance, à la planification stratégique, à la politique organisationnelle et à la recherche universitaire. L'étude fait également ressortir une forte demande de structures organisées de soutien par les pairs. Les discussions sur les résultats obtenus se font en fonction de la documentation connexe, du leadership en enseignement supérieur et du contexte socio-historique sud-africain. Fait également l'objet d'un examen, l'incidence de l'élaboration d'un programme de perfectionnement professionnel.

INTRODUCTION

Women in tertiary institutions tend to be under-represented in high status and leadership positions, both in faculty and in administration, and to be clustered in the lower ranks of both categories (see, for example, Humm, 1996; Kettle, 1996; Quina, Cotter, & Romenesko, 1998). This is despite increasing enrolments of female students at tertiary level (e.g. Dunlap, 1994). This global pattern is reproduced in South Africa, where only 11% of incumbents in the two highest ranks of tertiary executive administration in 1998 were female (de la Rey, 1998).

In various countries, notably the US, Australia and the UK (Eggins, 1997), professional development programmes for women leaders have been used as a strategic tool towards reversing this trend. The Forum of African Women Educationalists South Africa (FAWESA), a national advocacy group composed of women in executive positions in the higher education sector, commissioned this study as an initial step to developing such a programme in the South African context. No South African studies concerning the professional development needs of this group have been published to date. Professional development was conceived within a broader feminist goal of working towards gender justice through increasing and strengthening women's influence and leadership at senior levels in the higher education sector (cf. e.g. Franzway, Court & Connell, 1989).

In the post-apartheid era since 1994 higher education policy in South Africa has been informed by simultaneous pressures to redress the injustices of past discriminatory policies while introducing a framework based on greater accountability and efficiency. The institutionalisation of apartheid in higher education was so entrenched that the eradication of its legacy is an ongoing task of monumental proportions. At the same time there is the pressure to implement an approach to governance and funding that will bring greater efficiencies. Thus there have been budget cuts, proposals for merging institutions and a proposed funding framework based on payment for key deliverables. This latter shift is in line with international trends where in contexts such as Australia and in the United Kingdom there have been policy changes based on economic rationalization. South African leaders in higher education face enormous challenges in the management of these concurrent change processes.

On the positive side, there have been recent changes in legislation such as the introduction of an employment equity policy, that ensure that gender is receiving more attention than ever before. In the post apartheid era the higher education climate is more conducive than previously to a focus on strategies for advancing women leaders' positions in higher education.

Internationally, there is evidence that professional development programmes for women may be an effective means to this end (Eggins, 1997). This study was designed to consult a sample of potential beneficiaries of such programmes, in order to identify their perceptions of their professional development needs. It was motivated by a need to develop a strategy for women's advancement and to identify ways in which women leaders could become more effective within their current positions.

METHOD

Twenty-two women of different races, holding leadership positions of varying rank and across a range of higher education institutions, participated in

the study. Some of the 22 women interviewed were amongst the most senior women in the sector, countrywide. The interviews were conducted in four major South African cities (Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria) during the latter part of 1999. Thirteen of the women were in their 40s, while 4 were below that age, and 5 were in their 50s. Only 12 of the sample were married, while the remaining 10 were either single, divorced or widowed. 16 women had children, and of these, 8 had children under the age of 10. A range of institutions in the higher education sector was represented. Four women held executive-level positions in state institutions; and 2 were managing non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Seven participants were executives in higher educational institutions; 4 were at middle levels of administrative leadership; and 5 held primarily academic positions, although of these two were heads of department (HODs), while the remaining 3 had all wielded power in the higher education sector through unconventional channels. Given the small numbers of women leaders in South African higher education, the group represents a fairly broad range of leadership positions in the sector.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. A range of demographic data was collected from participants' *curricula vitae*, and from questions early on in the interview. The central focus of the interview was a checklist that covered professional, personal, managerial, leadership and political skills and competencies. The skills/ competencies categories were selected from a review of those routinely covered in management development programmes for women, as mentioned in the literature (e.g. Bhavnani, 1997; Fagenson & Lewis, 1995; Larwood & Wood, 1995).

Participants were asked to rank up to 7 skills in terms of greatest priority for their own career development. However, 5 very senior women, who all held executive positions, were asked to rank the same set of skills in terms of priority for more junior women leaders aspiring to senior positions. A frequency count of prioritised skills was done. The checklist included overlapping categories in order to gain a nuanced sense of which particular aspects of skill clusters would be of most value. There was scope provided in the checklist and in the interview format for participants to add to or qualify skills listed. Other interview topics covered career histories; formal and informal training and experiences that had contributed to professional development; personal attributes that had hindered or helped career advancement; current challenges faced; opinions about what should be done to advance women leaders in higher education; and suggestions for the proposed professional development programme.

A frequency table of prioritised skills was produced. Results from women who had filled out the checklist with their own career advancement in mind

were combined in the same table with those from more senior women who had completed it in terms of perceived career development needs of more junior women. Participants prioritised varying numbers of skills. The frequency table is merely a count of the total number of times each skill was prioritised. The interview data, which had been tape-recorded, was transcribed. The data was initially coded and analysed etically (outsider perspective), in terms of recurrent themes that related to a prior review of the literature about barriers to advancement of women in academia. However, the analysis depended on sensitive and reflective openness to new themes, and the analytic process became increasingly more emic (insider perspective) as it progressed, and the particularities of the data revealed themselves. Quotations are used to enrich the texture of the description.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of an unusual sample, in an unusual context

In many respects, the women interviewed have a highly unusual career profile by comparison with international norms for the higher education sector, and even perhaps (for different reasons) by comparison with other women academics in South Africa. Although all were graduates, and 12 held masters degrees, only 7 held doctorates. Internationally, a PhD is generally considered a normative entry requirement for many of the high-level positions that these women hold (Quina *et al*, 1988). Only 3 were full (as opposed to associate or honorary) professors. Only 12 were sufficiently qualified for their positions by traditional standards. Furthermore, only 4 of the 22 had followed traditional career paths to their current positions. Fifteen had held these positions for under 3 years, and 12 had worked for their current institutional employers for under 6 years.

The apparent anomalies in the above data are explicable in terms of the major recent disjuncture in South Africa's socio-political history. The majority of the women, black and white, bring a wealth of valuable experience to their positions even though they may not have the formal qualifications. Of a range of community activities including paid policy work, unpaid political/community work, union work, board memberships and paid work in non-governmental organisations, 18 had been involved in two or more of these activities. As a participant who holds an executive post commented: 'We all do so many things in South Africa, because there's so much that needs to be addressed in our society'.

It was evident from the interviews that many of these women are imbued with a strong ethic of duty and service to the South African collective. Many had prioritised their activist responsibilities, their contribution to political or community work, above their personal careers, very few of which

were planned. Although several now hold influential positions, the career opportunities of black participants had been stymied under discriminatory apartheid circumstances. However, many cited the value of their years of 'informal, experiential learning through actual involvement in a wide range of organisations outside of the academic field. . . [i]n civil society actually' as equipping them with the skills to do their current jobs effectively. Many of these women brought high levels of commitment to implementing change in or through their institutions.

SKILLS PRIORITIES

Table 1 presents the skills prioritised by participants.

TABLE 1. Rank order of prioritised skills

Rank	Skills	Frequencies (Max = 22)
1	Financial management	16
2	Research	12
4	Strategic planning	10
4	Strategies for managing office & institutional politics	10
5	Understanding educational policy	9
6	Networking	8
8	Managing conflict	7
8	Team building	7
10	Stress Management	6
10	Self-Awareness	6
12	Writing	5
12	Life-style management	5
16	Computer skills	4
16	Assertiveness	4
16	Project management	4
16	Understanding gender politics	4
19	Public speaking	3
19	Interpersonal skills	3
19	Committee & meeting practice	3
23	Career planning	2
23	Time management	2
23	Building self-confidence	2
23	Workshop facilitation skills	2
25	Self-motivation	1

From Table 1 it is clear that 'strategies for financial management, managing office and institutional politics', 'managing conflict', 'team building', 'understanding educational policy' and 'networking', were all highly prioritised by participants.

Organisational politics in contexts of change

A pattern emerged from the thematic analysis that linked the demand for these skills to the participants' experience of organisational politics. This overarching theme generated more discussion than any other. The less highly ranked skills of 'understanding gender politics', 'assertiveness', 'building self-confidence' and 'self-awareness' were also pertinent to this cluster. In the words of a participant who is an executive at a large university:

> So many of these things are critically important, and it is difficult to leave any one out. They're so inter-related. Strategies for managing office and institutional politics are so closely related to one's ability to network, interpersonal skills, managing conflict, they're so inter-related. And these are areas of expertise required by women who are aspiring to senior positions.

Overcoming otherness: Asserting the right to speak and be heard

The context of change in South Africa helps to explain aspects of this view. The national and sectoral environments are in transition. Many who formerly held more-or-less unassailed institutional power are moving to protect personal and ideological interests that are (realistically) perceived as under challenge. It is thus unsurprising that women (both black and white) whose institutional political agendas (or very presence) challenge persistently iniquitous elements of the former status quo, find themselves marginalised by influential incumbents using the range of political tools as their disposal. This is illustrated in the following extract from an interview with a woman dean:

> Ideologically I'm not aligned with the top administration of this university, and I mean I have paid a price for that. The vice-chancellor of this university has had numerous arguments with me, and very unpleasant ones at that. . . . I'm being made to feel that I am not toeing the line, and as a senior person, it becomes more and more problematic, because you have to be part of the decision-making at university, and ideologically I am not part of that, so – it's very problematic.

Almost all participants emphasised the difficulties of being isolated and tokenised as a senior woman in a predominantly masculine administrative environment. For black women, especially in the contexts of historically white institutions, the crucial salience of their otherness as women has been compounded or overshadowed by their otherness as blacks. This otherness centrally affects both their own and others' assessment of their (il)legitimacy as competent and credible players in the cut-throat arenas of organisational politics. Many women spoke of the courage and self-awareness required to overcome not only external stereotyping and discrimination, but also their own socialisation into gendered and racialised submission and the expectations that these traditionally subordinated roles should continue to be performed.

Thus possibilities for credible, authoritative voice and institutional influence are intricately related to social roles. Women who assert themselves *contra* their own socialisation and *contra* societal expectations are, in a metaphorical sense, speaking in a second tongue. For the black women who are literally speaking in a second or third language, as well as across racial and cultural divides, the attendant problematics of making oneself heard, and of fluctuations in self-confidence, are sometimes expressed in terms of pressure to be super-articulate. Many women, both black and white, emphasised the dire consequences of *faux pas* in the committee meetings which are crucial sites of institutional decision-making, and where their initial footholds are experienced as tenuous. As one of the women explained:

> At the moment being the only female vice-dean amongst deans – that's a challenge, because opening your mouth to talk, you kind of feel that I must say it right, it must come out right – it must not sound as if I am nagging. It is sitting there and thinking that I hope I said the right thing at this point in time.

Many of the women who have had years of political activism in the anti-apartheid struggle have reserves of skill and experience that sustain them in these treacherous environments. But many women are additionally required to confront the slurs on their competence associated with the stigma of affirmative action.

When one's capacities are in question, it may be difficult to gain the co-operation of teammates and colleagues lower down in the hierarchy. Many talked of the challenges of managing conflict while implementing change such as in this account:

> One of the major challenges . . . was working successfully with colleagues. And that was quite tough. . . . I came in from outside, as a senior lecturer, and . . . it was discomforting for some of my colleagues, and you know, they were very skilled, perhaps more skilled than myself, in some areas, and felt that and showed it. And you know, I was black, they were white, and so on, so you know, so all of that. But we got through it. It was very difficult, initially. So I think, the challenge was to actually develop a working team. You know, a team that could work together and that would pursue the objective of ensuring that students who are disadvantaged have access, and succeed in higher education.

Women in this sample tended to attribute their inclusive leadership approaches at least as much to their activist roots as to their feminine socialisation. That they have retained these values and styles in senior positions may to some extent be explained by the speed of their promotion, whereby they have perhaps not spent the time assimilating masculine norms and values that one may expect of women at their level (cf. Nicolson, 1996). Another reason may be that the collectivist leadership ethos, which was developed during the struggle against apartheid, constitutes a growing

counter-hegemonic discourse in institutions as former activists consolidate their positions in the formal sector. However, the traditional hierarchical, masculinist and racist cultures in tertiary education are tenacious (Oyegun, 1999; Walker, 1997). Collectivist/feminist leadership approaches may not be easy to implement, and the effort to do so may place added burdens on women as suggested below:

> And linked to [project management] is of course team-building. Certainly something that I've found difficult is managing people. Especially if you've come out of a democratic background. It's quite difficult to be the boss, and to balance your responsibility to getting a job done and to the people that are doing the job. It's always tricky. But men also need that. They need it in different ways

Senior women especially talked of the value and importance of self-awareness. This may be particularly important to women who undervalue their own competence, and to those whose behaviour as tokens is under constant scrutiny. According to Arroba & James (1987, cited in Mann, 1995), awareness of 'what one "carries" into a situation' is one of the key dimensions of organisational political competence.

In the changing climate of higher education where there is increased emphasis on financial efficiency, managerial skills such as financial management and systems planning skills are valued and are seen as markers of efficiency and criteria for promotion. Participants in the current study accorded top priority to financial management. Strategic planning was also given high priority. Systems thinking, while not initially included on the checklist, was added by several participants.

The acquisition of financial acumen was seen as a means to boost senior women's credibility in a masculinist context. As expressed by one of the women executives it is "a subtle way of dividing out the real power brokers from the rest." Women at different levels emphasised varying aspects of financial competence. At head of department (HOD) level, women wanted training on reading, understanding and preparing budgets, and how these interface with the larger context and requirements of their own institutions. At more senior levels, participants wanted to be able to exercise their managerial responsibilities with due diligence.

Financial delegation was seen as an important and needed skill in its own right, as was financial planning. Executives believed that it was important to know how the finances of their own institutions were developed, and to understand the state financing of higher education in an era of restructuring.

Training in financial planning was specifically included on several wish lists, and was seen as closely related to strategic planning. In the late 1990s this became a focus as government policy Institutions were required to submit three-year plans. As one of the women leaders noted:

> Planning has not been traditionally part of some institutions, particularly historically black institutions. And therefore to suddenly have to present a plan to the department is a huge culture shock.

Although most participants said that they would like to improve their computer skills, they did not prioritise this area, or other basic professional skills. Public speaking became more of a priority towards senior level, although almost everyone mentioned the difficulty of speaking and being heard in meetings.

Research was a highly prioritised skill, while writing received some attention. Even senior academic women holding professorships felt that there were gaps in their academic armouries. Demand for academic skills was driven by the academic imperative to publish or perish, and by the emphasis on qualifications as a route to promotion and credibility in a competitive, critical and hierarchical environment. Four participants were currently enrolled for a further degree, and another three were seriously contemplating studying again in the near future.

Several participants expressed a lack of confidence about writing and publishing, especially at junior levels. The following account is illustrative:

> *The first five years I was an academic I was too scared to write, because I didn't think I had anything useful to say. And that was very hard. And then people focus on it. Publication is a very important aspect of your career. And women really have a block about that.*

For some, this may be related to writing in a second language as suggested in this account:

> One of the problems of not publishing, or not to be seen to be publishing, is you keep the data there and you think you need to use a special language now, when you write, and you do feel that you don't have that special language, and you keep on postponing and postponing. As I said, I think I've got about ten articles that I could give myself time to take out this year, but I do not feel that there is that confidence in writing for publication in particular.

Some participants whose main focus is currently in management, as opposed to academic work, said that they would like to learn how to write better reports, and/or improve their information-gathering skills. Others with only a smattering of statistics felt that a more thorough knowledge could be a useful management tool, both to gather and to disseminate information.

Participants' comments about stress management, time management and career planning were linked, and were clustered around a series of role conflicts. Stress and a constant battle against the clock were symptoms of these. Conflicts included tensions between professional and domestic lives, which were predictably more severe for the mothers of young children. Some women who had previously given much of their time to political

activism were now refocusing on their individual careers. Two spoke very positively of the beneficial effects of career planning workshops in this regard.

Women tended to feel that they should cope with all of these demands. One participant was close to burnout, and another had taken a week off to recuperate from high stress levels. A possible explanation for the low prioritisation of time- and stress- related skills is that these women recognise that many of these conflicts are structural, and may not necessarily be resolved through learning skills. In fact, several women who prioritised lifestyle management, and who also had young children, said that their time management is very good.

Interpersonal skills, self-motivation and self-presentation were all ranked near the bottom of the list. 'Interpersonal skills' is a general category. The main specific areas of interpersonal difficulty experienced by participants related to gendered and racialized experiences of organisational culture, and have been covered above under organisational politics. Self-motivation was a non-issue for all but one or two. Where it was mentioned, it was related to the unstructured nature of certain aspects of working life, and the lack of managerial or mentoring support. Self-presentation and impression man-agement issues centred around the management of conflicting gender and work scripts (as discussed above), rather than on physical appearance.

A theme that emerged strongly from most participants was the vital impor-tance of support. Some felt that networking could bridge the gap between junior and senior women, which several perceived as a problem. There was a widely expressed need for women who had recently been appointed to positions to be supported and mentored. This was particularly important for women who were taking on large challenges in being promoted.

Many women felt that the greatest value of any professional development course for women is simply the opportunity to network. As is evident in the following quotation, there was an eagerness at the thought of learning from each other in a safe environment:

> I think what I would benefit from more than structured courses, is opportunities
> to work with other women in comparable positions, the mentorship, and to work
> with other women in shorter workshop situations where one does look at sharing
> experiences and looking at the international perspectives, case studies. But I
> think I would really value opportunities to develop relationships with potential
> mentors.

Horizontal learning was seen as empowering and the opportunity to share personal reflections on professional praxis, as opposed to the transmission of skills, was valued as indicated below:

> I think creating a setting where people can exchange views is absolutely
> vital. So that you don't have the presenters being in control all the time.
> . . . The participants . . . could become facilitators from time to time. .
> . . The submission of a resume helps you to know what the participants
> bring as their skills. And therefore you can utilise them in the programme,
> and in that way, you immediately are beginning the empowerment.

The value here may be that of developing a counter-discourse to sustain
women who are isolated in their own work environments. Gender analysis
is also seen as a crucial engine for change. The case for gender analysis is
clearly made in the following extract:

> I think a lot of lobbying has to take place amongst women. But women
> have to also get into decision-making structures, you know. So that
> women's voices are heard. Because ultimately we will be our best
> spokespeople. No one is going to head our cause the way we will. But we
> also need to vote other women into power in situations where we don't
> feel too comfortable.

CONCLUSION

Although the women leaders interviewed in this study expressed concerns
that were similar to women in similar positions in other parts of the world,
there are certain aspects of their experience that are specific to the current
South African context. Chief amongst these are the high level of extra-
institutional political experience and emancipatory consciousness gained
through the years of involvement in anti–apartheid activism that most
participants bring to their current leadership positions. A related aspect is
the unconventionality of their career paths. This has resulted in the
unconventional constellations of skills and competencies that these women
possess.

The division of women's energies by multiple role demands is a recurrent
theme for all women workers, but particularly in higher education and in
management, as discussed above. In the case of this sample, committed
involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle has in many cases preceded
domestic obligations in determining careers, but these have put extra demands
on time, and may explain why academic skills are perhaps more in demand
than one might expect at the level of positions held. Nevertheless, some
women's demand for skills of various kinds may be attributable to lack of
confidence, underestimation of capacities, or a generalised desire for support
in isolating circumstances. These may all have racial or gendered causes.

The move towards managerialism in the South African higher education
sector may account for the specific emphasis on technical management
skills. Certain areas, such as financial management and statistics, which
have an inherently functionalist edge, were considered especially amenable

to formal teaching and learning. Nevertheless, many women had found ways of learning even technical skills through informal means.

The challenges of managing this process in conjunction with political transformation may explain the strong emphasis on a range of skills needed for managing office and institutional politics. This is the case despite the prior political skills of many of the participants, which may suggest that the skills required are context-specific.

The demand from this group for a supportive, collectivist, empowering approach to professional development, with strong emphases on horizontal learning and networks, may be related to participants' emancipatory conscientization. What these women overwhelmingly wanted was an alive, active advocacy organisation, perhaps more than a formal professional development programme. In this sense they were redefining professional development according to their own needs and experiences, despite the emphasis on skills in the interview format.

One of the limitations of a study of skills development is that it runs the risk of overly focussing on an individualistic strategy to addressing the issue of the exclusion of women from positions of power. Such a strategy is perhaps best employed in the context of a multi-pronged approach to addressing the issues. Professional development programmes for women have to guard against paying attention to personal skills presented in a gender- and race-blind way that ignores or elides the hostile organisational cultures which render such skills pertinent. More attention needs to be given to professional development approaches where both structure and content might construct participants as fully participating agents, rather than as receptacles of remedial skills repertoires.

Yet, it is important to be wary of the tension between professional development and the need for structural and systemic change. Higher education is hierarchical and ostensibly meritocratic, with great emphasis placed on the evaluation of capacities through peer-reviewed scholarship and graded levels of professional qualification and professional advancement. Much of professional life in this sector, then, involves a *de facto* emphasis on individualist self-improvement through the development and demonstration of professional skills. Overt and continuing assessment of professional adequacy, versus deficit, is a feature of this environment. Professional development programmes aimed at advancement through improving academic skills cannot but engage with this discourse of competence/achievement versus deficit/failure.

In an effort to broaden this study's partially functionalist, skills-orientated discursive framing of the issue of professional development, we attempted to offset the possible demand effects of this discourse through space in the

interviews for open-ended reflection. The qualitative methodology and purposive sampling used in this study do not allow for generalisation. Neither are the professional development needs of this diverse group homogeneous. Nevertheless, we have tried to indicate broad trends. This group appears to have been profoundly influenced by the particular socio-historical circumstances of past and present South Africa, and by how they have both been shaped and have helped to shape this history. Most of them are in their 40s or older. Their needs may not be representative of younger cohorts of potential women leaders, who have experienced different sets of challenges and opportunities. In this regard, further research will be useful.

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