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*People, Partnerships and Pedagogies*

## **Mentoring of Female and Minority Leaders in Higher Educational Settings**

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The complexities and demands of leadership roles in universities are increasing. In an industry where leadership roles are dominated by white men, females and members of minority groups struggle to succeed in leadership positions. They express feelings of being out of place and reject by peers. Mentoring has been demonstrated as an effective tool to develop leadership skills, resulting in longevity in a career. This option is not always available or suitable for women and minorities. This paper suggests digital mentoring as a solution of issues of socialisation, distance, and a lack of local guides for women and minorities entering leadership positions within universities. Digital mentoring as a support will provide more skills and support for women and minorities to enter into and have longevity in leadership positions.

Keywords: Mentoring, Socialisation, Higher Education, Head of Department, Leadership, Deans.

### **Introduction**

Leadership roles within universities are becoming more demanding as they are expected to make 80% of decisions in a university (Ransdell et al., 2018). There is an expectation that leaders will be capital growers. The task of selecting leaders is vital to ensure they have extensive interpersonal skills, have knowledge about administration and have leadership skills (Ransdell et al., 2018). Once obtaining the role, leaders require further training to develop the necessary skills to handle the complexities and ambiguity of the role. Unfortunately, only 3% of tertiary leaders claim to receive any training in their roles, and 66% of that 3% claim the training was inadequate (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004). Leadership development in higher education institutions is described as 'small-scale and fragmented' (Mercer, 2021). This is partly due to the lack of research on the topic, a limited quantity of credible programs, and most leadership development is targeted at a singular individual (Floyd, 2016). However, it is recognised though that leadership development is becoming a focus in the Higher Education landscape (Hempsall, 2014; Mercer, 2021).

In this paper, leaders are defined as positions of authority in higher educational settings which include, but are not limited to, President, Vice President, Deans, Heads of Department, and Heads of Course. There is limited research examining the impact of mentoring in any of these positions individually or collectively. Research of particular note is Ransdell et al., (2018), Floyd (2016) and Hemsall (2014) all of which are reviewed in this paper.

Diversity and equity are recognised as desired elements of leaders in higher education institutions, as it supports inclusion, allows for greater support for student services, and has attracted culturally sensitive funding (Finkel, 2020). However, both women and people of ethnicity struggle to secure positions and retain positions in higher education institutions (Mercer, 2021). Research has found that over 83% of leaders in Higher Education organisations are white (Espinosa et al., 2019). This suggests that there is an underrepresentation of minorities in leadership roles. Mentoring of leaders has been suggested as an effective method of developing individuals in their position and for new positions (Finkel, 2020; Gmelch & Miskin, 2004; Mercer, 2021). However, this has not been without issues. A thematic literature review was conducted, finding a large range of articles on mentoring leaders in Higher Educational Institutions. The review also found literature reporting the data finding an underrepresentation of women and people from minorities in leadership roles. Gaps were found linking women and minorities in leadership roles and mentoring, especially digital mentoring. While other researchers have identified issues in obtaining roles (Mercer, 2021) or reported data (Espinosa et al., 2019), this paper identifies the issue of women and minorities missing opportunities and investigates how digital mentoring can be used to help increase the number of women and minorities in higher education settings.

### **Women and Minorities Missing Opportunities**

Women and people from minority groups when promoted to leadership positions express that they feel like an outsider, they feel alienation, and they feel like they are in a hostile climate from entrenched faculty members that they lead

(Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Paterson & Chicola, 2017). A perceived lack of support from male supervisors compounds the issue. This has an impact of making women question their ability to perform the role and their personal self-work, resulting in low job satisfaction. While women proportionally are represented in the lecturer ranks, they are underrepresented in leadership positions (Freeman & Forthun, 2019; Gmelch & Miskin, 2004; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Packer-Williams & Evans, 2011; Paterson & Chicola, 2017). Similarly, members of different ethnic groups are underrepresented in leadership positions within higher educational institutions (Freeman & Forthun, 2019; Gmelch & Miskin, 2004; Packer-Williams & Evans, 2011; Turner & Waterman, 2019). Organisational culture, workplace relationships, management types, gender stereotyping, (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021) and inadequate mentoring are a factors for why women and people from minority cultures have underrepresentation (Packer-Williams & Evans, 2011; Paterson & Chicola, 2017).

Males receive more training to prepare them for leadership roles prior to assuming the role (Mercer, 2021). This results in more applications from males. Women are reluctant to apply for a role until they feel confident to successfully do the role (Macfarlane & Burg, 2019), resulting in less applications from women. Further there is a perception from some practitioners that women and people from ethnic groups lack the required managerial skills to lead faculty (Goldman et al., 2013). This results in women and members of ethnic groups holding fewer middle and top management positions (Schermerhorn et al., 2014). They face a glass ceiling that is difficult to break through and experience higher levels of harassment than the dominant culture of white males. Mentoring can provide an avenue for supportive discussions to manage the difficulties found in leadership roles. The scarcity of women in higher leadership positions impacts the availability of women to mentor other women (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Packer-Williams & Evans, 2011). Mentees refer to seek out a mentor who 'looks' more like them in gender and ethnicity (Packer-Williams & Evans, 2011; Turner & Waterman, 2019). This is due to the nature of people connecting with like people and the belief of similar shared life experiences. Digital mentoring can overcome the barriers of distance and local availability of women and minorities to mentor.

## **Social Benefits**

It has been identified that mentoring has positive impacts on beginning leaders by socialising them into their role and supporting the early years of their career (Levin et al., 2020). Central to the mentoring is the relationship that is developed between mentor and mentee. Successful face to face mentoring has been built on the development of a positive and healthy relationship between the two parties. Studies have found that to build the mentoring relationship, the mentor and mentee need to meet regularly spending quality time for leadership and relationship development (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Hayes, 2019; Hayes & Mahfouz, 2020). Mentoring provides advantages for the mentee in career enhancement from the political and performance aspects of socialization (Allen et al., 2017). The mentee benefits from the establishment of successful and satisfying relationships with peers, the ability to cope with work-induced stress, and overall organisational fit. Mentoring allows the organisation to mould the mentee to fit the needs of the organisation, while allowing the mentee to define themselves to peers (Allen et al., 2017). The mentoring process allows the mentee to develop sense of both the organisation and the new role. This results in a smooth transition for the mentee into the role and ultimately a strong workforce for the organisation.

Technology allows the mentee to make observations in an unintrusive manner. With time to meet and debrief on the observations the mentor and mentee can build stronger relationships, leading to better outcomes (Hayes, 2019; Tahir et al., 2016). The social environment advantages women and minorities as they intrusively respond to the emotional intelligence.

## **Digital Mentoring as a solution**

Digital mentoring has emerged as a response to the changes in work and life practices. It has changed the traditional practices reflecting societal structural changes and developed new skills needed to manage workplace, life and societal changes (Leppisaari, 2019). There is a dearth of research on digital mentoring of leaders in higher education facilities (DeWaard & Chavhan, 2020). The research that is available, coupled with research in similar cooperate roles, suggest that technology can be fully integrated into mentoring practices (DeWaard & Chavhan, 2020).

When mentoring women and minorities in higher education leadership positions, mentoring needs to be tailored to the specific needs of the individuals (Freeman & Forthun, 2019; Paterson & Chicola, 2017). Successful mentoring for women is found through relationships building (Paterson & Chicola, 2017). This modern approach to mentoring utilises an informal mentoring approach which nurtures and empowers mentees to embrace both the procedural and emotional

aspects of the role. This viewpoint observes a Marxist perspective from minority viewpoints as encompassing class, race, and gender in a complex social world (Colley, 2002). This provides a supportive framework for mentoring of women and minorities, enabling them to overcome the stereotypes and practices of male recruitment in higher education institutions. Research suggests that professional learning can be enhanced through the use of technologies in mentoring to overcome issues of geographical separation, time limitation, and matching mentors to mentees (Owen, 2015). Digital mentoring is based on similar practices as face-to-face mentoring. Digital mentoring differs by being driven by the needs of the mentee to learn and develop rather than the policies of an institution (Owen, 2015). This makes digital mentoring an effective tool for mentoring women and minorities in terms of purpose, as well as being a cost-effective method of professional development and mentoring. The tailored approach fulfils the need of women and minorities as their needs are different and there is a lack of localised mentors for women and minorities.

### **Communication in a Technological Setting**

The largest hindrances to digital mentoring is the technology itself and the fear of or the perceived fear of using technology (Bock et al., 2020), particularly amongst women and minorities. Teachers College Special Education Fellowship Program (TCSEFP) program is a hybrid model combining eMentoring and face-to-face mentoring. The program revealed that participants experienced a distance technology phobia (Bock et al., 2020). Many of the issues with technology phobia developed through the lack of expertise of mentors to use the available technology. To overcome this, digital mentoring occurred through non-video methods such as email and phone (Bock et al., 2020). This would indicate a reliance on more traditional methods of communication, which is not true digital mentoring. This may be compounded by women and minorities tending to be more dependent on face-to-face modes of communication. The technology phobia was overcome through training, enabling both the digital mentor and mentee to be well versed in using technology to effectively communicate. Digital mentoring program that includes training as a component of the preparation for mentoring found that participants did not mention technology being a hinderance (Vaughan-Marra, 2017). Support and training in the use of technology will enable women and minorities to engage with digital mentoring.

### **Time Benefits**

Impeding the cultivation of effective mentoring relationships is time constraining (Harris & Crocker, 2003). With the limited time that mentors and mentee's frequently have, it has been suggested that using technology to supplement face-to-face meeting would create more opportunities for relationship development (Tahir et al., 2016). With leaders being time poor, digital mentoring allows for meeting outside of normal time and across distances. It removes travel constraints and the associated costs, making it financially viable. This makes digital mentoring more appealing for women and minorities who often do not have the same access to travel and resources and their white male counterparts.

Digital mentoring overcomes the limitations of time demands on leaders in higher education; however, it has been argued that it cannot replace face-to-face mentoring (Schneiderman, 2013). Issues arise in miscommunication of body language, facial expressions, and tone, which can lead to the breakdown of relationships. Whilst video conferencing overcomes some of these restrictions, it does not solve the lack of face-to-face meetings. A hybrid model of some face-to-face mentoring to supplement the digital mentoring may be a solution. The hybrid model enables women and minorities to access the benefits and relational aspects of both the traditional face-to-face model, while overcoming the disadvantages of a lack of resources and time in the pure digital mentoring model.

### **Distance Relationship**

There is generally a reluctance to be involved in a non-face-to-face mentoring program (Cooper et al., 2014). This is due in part to the lack of an initial relationship between the parties and the perceived difficulties in establishing the relationship. Digital mentoring requires more time to develop the relationship between mentor and mentee (Owen, 2015). This is due to the issues in reading context and responding to body language nuances in a digital context. Understanding the individual environment that the mentor or mentee operates in can be an issue. In a study on mentoring practices in Vermont, it was found that when mentors and mentees met a combination of regular face to face, intersperse with digital mentoring, the mentees reported stronger relationships and more impact in their role (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). This hybrid model of mentoring benefits women as they instinctively respond to facial indicators and will form a bond with a female mentor quicker.

Digital mentoring overcomes the geographical restraints of distance (Vaughan-Marra, 2017). This allows a greater focus on the matching of mentee and mentor process to ensure that the fit is right to build a successful relationship. As women and minority leaders in higher educational institutions are fewer and further apart, the ability to connect over larger distances is a benefit for them. It enables more women and minorities to be mentored and opens opportunities for development and promotion in higher educational institutions.

Digital learning has been promoted through much of the world as a cost effective measure for leadership development (Bhebhe et al., 2015). Digital learning can improve access to training and overcome issues of diversity and economics. Digital mentoring improves professional practice by expanding the range of skills and knowledges of the mentee (Bhebhe et al., 2015).

## Conclusion

For too long, women and minorities have been underrepresented in positions of leadership in higher educational institutions. They have lacked the support required to succeed in leadership positions that their white male counterparts generally receive. The lack in availability locally of suitable mentors and the lack of resourcing hinders the process of women and people of minorities from successfully transitioning to leadership positions. Digital mentoring has been shown as a strategy to overcome these hinderances and provide support for women and minorities to move into leadership positions.

Future work in this field could measure the effectiveness of digital mentoring for women and minorities. Future work can take this understanding into the design of future digital mentoring applications, where the application will be designed to facilitate collaboration.

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