**Past, present and future: How do we crack the pressures of female academic leadership in the post Covid19 landscape?**

***Introduction:***

Higher education (HE) is at the forefront of management and leadership however there is a substantial gap for female academic leaders in support for professional development when compared to their sisters in industry (Ginsberg, Davis, & Simms, 2019; Marchant & Wallace, 2013). In 2016, we (the facilitators of the round table) connected through a program leaders professional development workshop hosted by our institution. From this connection a collaborative and innovative approach was taken to working with our peers in developing action learning sets to encourage and support academic professional development for all levels. During this work, we have seen a distinct need to emphasize the support for female leadership. Although this is not a gender exclusive approach, the purpose of this round table discussion is to share experiences from the past and to envision how we can break down barriers for females and stay true to ourselves in working towards our professional goals in HE post Covid19. After reflecting on our academic leadership journey, the aim of the round table is to share, connect and create pathways forward through action learning (Dick, 2017) as an effective way to sustain female professional development (Delaney & Stewart, 2019; Zuber-Skerritt & Louw, 2014)

The under representation of females in HE leadership raises the need for further consideration (Aiston & Yang, 2017). Although many universities in Australia have appointed female Vice Chancellors, women are predominantly employed at the lower echelons (level A, B and C) with challenges in gaining promotion (Marchant and Wallace 2013). This gap is highlighted by approximately 44% of Australian academics identified as female yet only 25% holding senior lecturer or higher positions thus demonstrating the current gender inequity in HE leadership roles (Lipton, 2015). To further escalate the problem of equity in enabling professional development, the majority of casuals and teaching intensive roles are females (Crimmins, 2016).

The substantial increase in casual and teaching intensive academic roles brings in another element as the ability to gain tenure or promotion generally requires a strong research portfolio which is challenging for those who are focused on teaching (Barnes, 2020; Yasukawa & Dados, 2018). Females are often delegated strong pastoral or administrative components including program director roles with inducements that ‘it will be good for your career’ however these can add more stress in uncertain times (Dutton & Worline, 2020). With over 21,000 jobs at risk in Australia alone, the recent situation with Covid19 has heavily impacted HE (Doughney, 2020). There are already calls to not go back to the status quo in the post Covid19 world for HE (Parker, 2020), hence further uncertainty for the more vulnerable in academia. As the landscape of HE shifts deeper into the business case of teaching with a neo-liberal emphasis, female academics who make up a large portion of the more exposed academic sector will be further stymied in their professional development.

Due to the nuances of the HE system, the abundance of mainstream resources around developing leadership skills has minimal impact therefore give no value in traversing any professional trajectory towards individuals’ goals. Indeed, even for the more resolute academics this can lead to high levels of frustration. Sheryl Sandberg's assertion that females should be more ambitious was met with Michelle Obama’s response: "That whole, 'So you can have it all' - nope, not at the same time. That's a lie. And it's not always enough to lean in, because that shit doesn't work all the time," (Armstrong, 2019; Sandberg, 2015). Although doing it differently from men, women in HE today are “introducing new ways of approaching the opportunities and challenges” (Latchem, Kanwar and Ferreira, 2013, p157). In parallel with these statements our interest in female academic leadership, was peaked in recent research where we found a disparity in professional development of espoused views of institutions e.g. Athena Swan ([www.sciencegenderequity.org.au](http://www.sciencegenderequity.org.au)), versus the actual encouragement and support experienced by female academics which will be of further importance given the radical changes in the future of the HE landscape (Doughney, 2020; Parker, 2020) and the impacts of Covid-19 (Stephenson & Harris Rimmer, 2020).

***Theoretical Foundation/ Teaching Implication:***

In the spirit of the virtual conference combined with the aim of being innovative and collaborative, we propose an action learning based round table discussion. The focus is to stimulate and explore individual’s academic leadership intent and identity in terms of professional development post Covid19 and within the personal context of higher education. Building on continual learning theory through a normative re-educative lens (Argyris, 1990, 2006; Gapp & Fisher, 2007) we will guide the round table discussion through a cyclical experience (Deming, 1994; Stewart & Gapp, 2018). To achieve this online experiential approach, we are adapting the method of Lego SeriousPlay© to ask participants to simply use any tactile approach (tablet, pen and paper, whiteboard etc.) to underpin the action learning (Dick, 2017) methodology. As a result of the round table, new skills will be developed by participants in terms of resilience, innovation, creativity and lateral thinking to employ and establish collaborative ways and means to cope, overcome and potentially improve one’s leadership self-confidence within their workplace.

**Session description:**

In this round table, we seek to explore and engage in narratives around the issues of female leadership in HE post Covid19. What has worked in the past? What has not worked? How do we move forward? Our aim in this round table is to create a collective and safe environment to explore individual female leadership practices, experiences and to gain deeper insights into individual’s priorities, leadership goals, practices and understandings. In the perfect world we would use Lego to take participants through an experiential action learning set however during this workshop we will use the online environment to encourage participants to use whatever is available to them e.g. pen, color pencils, paper, tablet, word documents to explore how they see themselves, what are there ambitions and how they might be achieved.

Firstly, we will open the discussion with brief introductions to each other and the process. Secondly, we will guide an interactive process and discussion with participants as they go through a cyclical experience (Deming, 1994; Stewart & Gapp, 2018) underpinned by action learning methodology (Dick, 2017). The collaborative and interactive approach is proven to extend ideas, views and often break down assumptions and barriers to perceived challenges in a safe and open-minded environment (Hadida, Tarvainen & Rose, 2015). The discussion will be interactive and start with 10 minutes for an overview of the methodology (action research and action learning sets – i.e. Dick 1990, 2017; Revans 1982; Ackland, 1991) and include some ground rules to create a ‘safe place’ (what is said in the room stays in the room). Subsequent to the foundational discussion (10 minutes), Table 1 shows the three phases (10 minutes each) that will be synthesized through a concluding debrief of 20 minutes. For the outcome of this round table we channel Germaine Greer’s statement where “the aim is not to present a plan, or even a series of certainties or correct observations, but a correct statement of a problem” (Kleinhenz 2018) that is extended into a scope of possibilities of how one might be able to achieve what they want in their professional development.

Table 1: Round table phases based on a synthesis of Theory in Action and an action learning process (Argyris, 1990; Dick, 2017; Stewart & Gapp, 2018).

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| **Theory in Action** |  | ***Plan*** | ***Do*** | ***Study*** | ***Act*** |
| ***Theory in Action***  ***Espoused Theory*** | Phase 1 | Decide on what you can use – pen/paper; tablet; whiteboard | Simple task e.g. think about your leadership and draw a tower | Debrief and report: What does this mean? Why did you use that color; shape; style? | Reflect |
| Phase 2 | Using the same tools | How do you feel supported in your leadership (PD) goals and build your impression? | Debrief and report: What does this mean? How does this make you feel? | Reflect |
| Phase 3 | Last time using the same tools | With leadership/PD in mind what do you want your future to look like. | Debrief and report: What does this mean? How does this make you feel? | Reflect |

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