

# Women's Leadership in Higher Education: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

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**Abstract:** This study explores women's leadership in higher education through a synthesis of research on leadership trends, organizational challenges, and institutional opportunities influencing progression into senior academic and administrative roles. A PRISMA-based systematic review was conducted using peer-reviewed studies identified through academic databases, with search terms related to academic leadership and higher education management. After screening and applying inclusion criteria, the selected studies were analyzed using thematic synthesis. The findings indicate increasing scholarly attention to women's leadership in higher education, alongside persistent management-related challenges, including constrained leadership pipelines, promotion systems focused on academic output, centralized governance structures, workload imbalance, and limited leadership development opportunities. The review also identifies institutional practices that support leadership progression, such as mentorship, succession planning, leadership training programs, and transparent evaluation systems. This study contributes to the higher education management literature by integrating leadership trends, organizational challenges, and leadership development practices within a single analytical perspective.

**Keywords:** Women's leadership, higher education management, academic leadership, organizational challenges, leadership development

**JEL Classification:** M12; I23; J24

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## INTRODUCTION

The introduction begins by highlighting how higher education institutions rely on effective senior academic/administrative leaders for their success in regards to teaching quality, research output, governance, and human resources. Research interest has developed over time regarding women's participation in higher education leadership due to changes in the workplace and institutional structure (Meza-Mejia et al., 2023; Madsen & Longman, 2020). Women make up a significant portion of the academic workforce but continue to be underrepresented at the senior leadership levels of many higher education institutions. Many studies have shown that women are also underrepresented in positions such as Vice Chancellor/Chancellors, Rectors, Deans, and Heads of Departments (Pillay, 2025; Ayenalem & Taye, 2025). The continued disparity in the number of women in these senior roles creates an important opportunity to analyze leadership pathways and the institutional systems which influence the movement of women through university leadership ranks.

As managers, increased diversity in leadership is linked to improved decision making, flexibility to adapt to changing conditions, and increased effectiveness in the operation of an institution (Gallegos et al., 2025; Maheshwari, 2023). Furthermore, the diversity of leadership experience and views among members of an organization may lead to enhanced innovation and improve the effectiveness of governance processes within academic organizations (Gallegos et al., 2025; Maheshwari, 2023). The organizational factors of recruitment systems, promotion criteria, the distribution of workload, professional development opportunities for leaders, the culture of the institution, and the structures of governance all impact the flow of candidates through leadership pipelines in higher education (Alshdiefat et al., 2024; Le Fevre et al., 2024).

This study conducted a systematic review using PRISMA methodology to synthesize and evaluate the body of research available concerning the leadership of women in higher education, and to provide insights into the current trends in leadership, the issues that affect the advancement of women to leadership positions, and the ways in which institutions support the development of their leaders. By synthesizing research on women's leadership from multiple types of institutions, this study will contribute to the existing literature on higher education leadership by providing an integration of research findings related to the three managerially relevant themes of developing a leadership pipeline,

structuring governance, and implementing supportive mechanisms for the development of leaders.

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

### **Leadership theories relevant to higher education management**

Transformational Leadership Theory is a common leadership approach in higher education management because it is connected with vision, motivation, and institutional capacity development. So, in order to be successful, higher education institution leaders should be able to establish connections between the organization's strategic goals and the academic mission of the institution, and encourage participation from both academic and administrative employees (Maheshwari, 2023). The transformational leadership theory has particular relevance when evaluating the effectiveness of leadership at Research-Intensive and Teaching Oriented Institutions.

Distributed Leadership Theory is another well-established leadership theory in higher education management. Because the majority of academic institutions, including many others, practice distributed leadership, distributed leadership involves distributing leadership responsibility among departments, faculties, and committees, so leadership is viewed as an organizational function and not simply as a position (Le Fevre et al., 2024). As such, Distributed Leadership Theory provides information regarding how leadership responsibilities are delegated, and how the leadership potential of each employee grows over time in the academic structures.

Human Capital Theory provides a conceptual framework for examining leadership development in higher education. Ultimately, the advancement of leadership is determined by the accumulation of different types of academic credentials, managerial experience, research output, and professional networks that are directly impacted by the evaluation and promotion processes in the institution (Ayenalem & Taye, 2025). Consequently, these conceptual frameworks collectively form a base for developing evaluations of leadership that are grounded in organizational practices and performance.

### **Organizational and Institutional Perspectives on Career Advancement**

The progression of careers in higher education institutions is much more likely to be influenced by

the nature of organizational and institutional factors as opposed to the ability of the individual. The criteria for promotion, performance evaluation systems, workloads allocation systems, and the formal models of institutional governance all contribute to the opportunities available for individuals to assume leadership positions, and their career path in the academic organization (Alshdiefat et al., 2024).

Institutional Theory explains the way in which institutionalized norms, routines and governance frameworks influence organizational behavior. In higher education, the formal rules and informal practices of an institution typically determine if an employee will be encouraged to seek out a leadership position or be prepared to accept one. Such institutionalized practices can lead to stability but they can also limit the degree of freedom in selecting and developing leaders (Meza-Mejia et al., 2023).

Organizational Management Perspective indicates that the progression of careers in leadership in academic organizations depends largely upon how institutions create leadership development programs, mentorship structures and succession planning mechanisms. Institutions that have formal pathways for the development of leadership and transparent evaluation procedures, generally have more predictable and structured transitions to leadership positions; whereas, institutions that do not have such systems rely on informal networking and ad hoc appointments (Pillay, 2025).

### **Leadership Pipeline and Career Progression in Academic Organizations**

The leadership pipeline is a helpful model for demonstrating how academics advance through Early Academic Roles into Senior Leadership Roles at Higher Education Institutions. In general, an Academic Career Pathway begins by advancing through the ranks of teaching and research roles and then moving to mid-level academic management roles (Program Coordinators, Department Chairs, Associate Deans), and then to Senior Executive Roles (Adewale & Potokri, 2023). The transition through the leadership pipeline depends on access to leadership roles, the balance of workloads, criteria for performance assessment, and opportunities for developing skills as a leader (Gallegos et al., 2025). Generally speaking, as a person advances up the leadership pipeline they become increasingly exposed to governance responsibilities and decision-making processes of their institution, thus preparing them to be a ready leader.

While the concept of a Leadership Pipeline in Higher Education has traditionally been viewed as

being linear, in reality, many factors can interrupt an individual's ability to progress up the pipeline such as interruptions in one's career, unbalanced access to leadership roles, and variability in institutional support for developing leaders (Markwei et al., 2025). An understanding of the structure and functioning of the Leadership Pipeline will allow researchers to understand and document trends in leadership development in Academic Organizations and provide insight into the organizational challenges associated with developing effective leaders within these organizations.

### **Integrated Conceptual Framework**

This study uses an integrated conceptual framework, based on the reviewed theories and organizational perspectives, to illustrate how leadership progression is related to institutional management systems and leadership outcomes.

As shown in Figure 1, The model demonstrates that both institutional and organizational aspects can affect a leader's advancement through the hierarchy in a higher education institution. Aspects of an institution's structure include; the way it is governed (governance); the system for promotion within the institution; the division of work load among the faculty members; and the support of developing future leaders through formal leadership development opportunities. The interplay between these structural aspects of the institution and the processes of supporting the development of future leaders, i.e., mentorship and leadership development programs, can impact the types of leaders who are represented in governance and other leadership positions, the effectiveness of governance, and ultimately the performance of the organization.

The model illustrates this dynamic interaction between the organizational/structural aspects of an institution and the development of its future leaders.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) based systematic review methodology has been adopted to collect and analyze data on women's leadership in higher education. The use of PRISMA ensures that there is a transparent and consistent method of identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies. This systematic review methodology is particularly well-suited to this area of study as research regarding leadership in higher education is highly fragmented across different types of institutions, geographic locations, and methodologies. By utilizing a PRISMA

methodology, the potential for selection bias is minimized and allows for the use of reliable thematic analysis techniques for reviewing existing studies.

Peer reviewed academic database searches in areas such as higher education, leadership, management and organization studies were utilized to conduct the literature search. Only peer-reviewed journal articles and relevant conference proceedings were included in the review; therefore, gray literature and unpublished materials were excluded from the review.

Combinations of search terms related to women's leadership, higher education leadership, academic leadership, university management, leadership challenges and leadership development were used. Boolean operators, "AND" and "OR", were used to limit and expand search results. Searches were limited to titles, abstracts, and keywords. Studies published during the period of 2010 through 2025 were included to reflect the most current developments related to leadership within higher education institutions.

Studies on leadership in higher education institutions utilizing qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and systematic review methodologies were included in the review. Studies located outside the higher education sector, non-peer reviewed materials, editorials, and dissertation were excluded from the review. Studies written in English language with full-text availability were the only type of publication included.

Following the PRISMA process, records identified from database searches were imported into a reference manager and duplicates were removed. Titles and abstracts were screened to determine relevance to leadership in higher education. Full-text articles were then assessed using inclusion criteria, resulting in the final set of studies used for analysis.

As shown in Figure 2, The pie chart illustrates the proportion of qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and systematic review studies included in the PRISMA based systematic review on women's leadership in higher education

Relevant information was extracted from each included study using a structured coding framework that captured publication year, geographic context, research design, and key findings related to leadership progression and organizational management.

A thematic synthesis approach was used to organize findings into three categories:

leadership trends, management and organizational challenges, and leadership opportunities in higher education institutions. Patterns across studies were identified through comparative analysis.

As shown in Figure 3, the PRISMA diagram illustrates the studies included at each stage of the systematic review process, including identification, screening, and eligibility assessment, leading to the final selection of the literature sample for this study. The figure demonstrates the transparency and systematic structure used to narrow down the literature for analysis.

## RESULTS

As shown by the systematic review, there has been a consistent trend of increased research regarding women's leadership in higher education since 2010. Early studies focused primarily on representation at various levels of leadership, whereas, more recently, researchers have investigated leadership development through a lens of management and organization (Pillay, 2025; Meza-Mejia et al., 2023). This trend indicates a developing understanding of the importance of the role of leadership within institutions of higher education in terms of its connection to governance, organizational development and leadership pipelines (Pillay, 2025; Meza-Mejia et al., 2023). Research geographically focuses primarily in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and in some parts of Asia, as higher education systems expand or undergo structural changes in those regions (Ayenalem & Taye, 2025; Alshdiefat et al., 2024). Research conducted in developed higher education systems generally concentrates on pathways for development in regards to leadership, as well as the effectiveness of governance models in their systems, whereas research in developing systems generally focuses on providing access to leadership positions, as well as the institutional barriers that exist.

Through the body of literature reviewed, it was identified that organizational systems shape leadership development opportunities in higher education. The lack of formalized leadership pipelines, the use of informal processes for selecting leaders, and the prioritization of research productivity over leadership contributions in promotion decisions all limit opportunities for individuals to develop as leaders (Gallegos et al., 2025; Adewale & Potokri, 2023). Institutional culture, as well as governance structures, also impact an individual's preparedness for leadership, with decision making authority being highly centralized, and limited participation in governance contributing to reduced opportunities for leadership preparedness (Le Fevre et al., 2024). Heavy teaching and administrative workloads further reduce opportunities for the development of leadership skills.

Despite the existing barriers to leadership development, the review identified several institutional practices that support the development of leadership. These include structured leadership development programs, mentorship, succession planning, and transparent governance processes that contribute to both the development of leaders, and the long-term sustainability of institutions (Al-Naqbi & Aderibigbe, 2024; Madsen & Longman, 2020).

Additionally, the review found that institutions that make investments in the development of their leaders demonstrate stronger governance, more defined strategic direction, and improved organizational performance (Pillay, 2025).

Table 1. Summary of Key Management Challenges and Leadership Opportunities in Higher Education

As shown in Figure 4, the bar chart illustrates the annual number of peer-reviewed publications on women's leadership in higher education between 2010 and 2025. The chart indicates relatively low publication output during the early years (2010–2014), followed by a moderate increase between 2015 and 2019, and a noticeable rise in scholarly output from 2020 onward. This trend reflects the growing academic interest in leadership and management issues within higher education institutions.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the systematic review are integrated with an analysis of leadership trends, organizational issues, and institutional practices to understand how they combine to affect the development of leaders in higher education. As interest in women's leadership in higher education grows so does the amount of research being done about leadership as one of the key functions of management in colleges and universities. In recent years, research has transitioned from simply discussing the progression of leadership to studying it analytically and evaluating institutional governance. This demonstrates that the development of leaders in higher education is highly related to the organizational environment, governance structure, and institutional capacity.

This review indicates that the ability to advance through leadership positions in higher education is greatly impacted by the organizational systems that exist in those institutions, and less dependent upon individual capability. Some of the persistent barriers to advancing through leadership positions include constrained leadership pipelines, informal promotion practices, and evaluation systems that

measure primarily a faculty member's research productivity and secondarily their leadership contributions (Adewale & Potokri, 2023; Gallegos et al., 2025).

Additionally, institutional culture, hierarchical governance structures, and uneven workloads all impact leadership preparation and availability for leadership opportunities (Alshdiefat et al., 2024; Markwei et al., 2025).

On the other hand, the literature provides evidence of several institutional practices that can facilitate the development of leadership in higher education. Leadership development programs that are formally implemented, mentoring, and succession planning create a foundation for the preparation of leaders and the smooth transfer of leadership responsibilities (Madsen & Longman, 2020; Al-Naqbi & Aderibigbe, 2024). Similarly, support mechanisms such as open communication regarding decision making processes and recognizing leadership contributions, increase leader involvement and effectiveness. Higher education institutions that develop and provide support for the development of its leaders tend to have clear strategic direction and produce more effective governance (Pillay, 2025). This study advances knowledge in both leadership and management theories by demonstrating how leadership pipelines, governance structures, evaluation systems, and institutional support mechanisms interact to shape leadership outcomes in higher education (Maheshwari, 2023; Meza-Mejia et al., 2023).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the study was designed to provide a systematic overview of the current state of knowledge regarding women's leadership in higher education (including both trends and challenges facing women leaders in academic institutions) it specifically examines trends, challenges, and opportunities for women's leadership in the context of academic institutions through the application of a PRISMA-based systematic review methodology and the use of peer-reviewed literature from 2010 to 2025. A major outcome of the study was that in recent years there has been an increase in the number of research studies dealing with leadership issues in higher education. The implications of this are twofold. On one hand some researches interpret this trend as evidence of increasing awareness of the importance of leadership in academic organizations. On the other hand, many also view the trend as evidence of an increasing recognition of the need to examine how the organizational systems within

higher education impact the experiences of women in leadership positions.

While the study found that the primary influence on women advancing into leadership roles at the academic level is the organization itself (which may include such things as whether or not the organization provides formal opportunities for career development, what process(es) the organization uses to evaluate/assess leadership potential/performance, the type of governance structure the organization utilizes, etc.) and how the organization manages workloads of its employees, the study does not provide data regarding individual or institutional differences in these areas of opportunity.

In addition to highlighting organizational challenges that can impede or delay the advancement of women through the ranks of academic leadership, the study also identified a number of structural features of organizations that are associated with high levels of success in advancing women through the ranks of academic leadership. Specifically, the study found that organizations that implemented formal leadership development programs, provided mentoring support to aspiring women leaders, engaged in succession planning, and maintained open and transparent governance processes were significantly more likely to have women leaders who advanced rapidly through the ranks.

The principal contribution of the study was to develop and apply a new conceptual model that integrates theoretical models of leadership with institutional theories of organizations. The model emphasizes the ways in which leadership progression in higher education occurs through the operation of the formal systems of organizations, including those systems related to recruitment, promotion, and evaluation, as well as governance systems and workload management systems.

The study supports the idea that effective strategic management of academic organizations requires effective strategic management of leadership. Furthermore, the study suggests that organizations seeking to effectively manage leadership should design and implement institutional systems that promote and support the development and advancement of women leaders throughout the organization.

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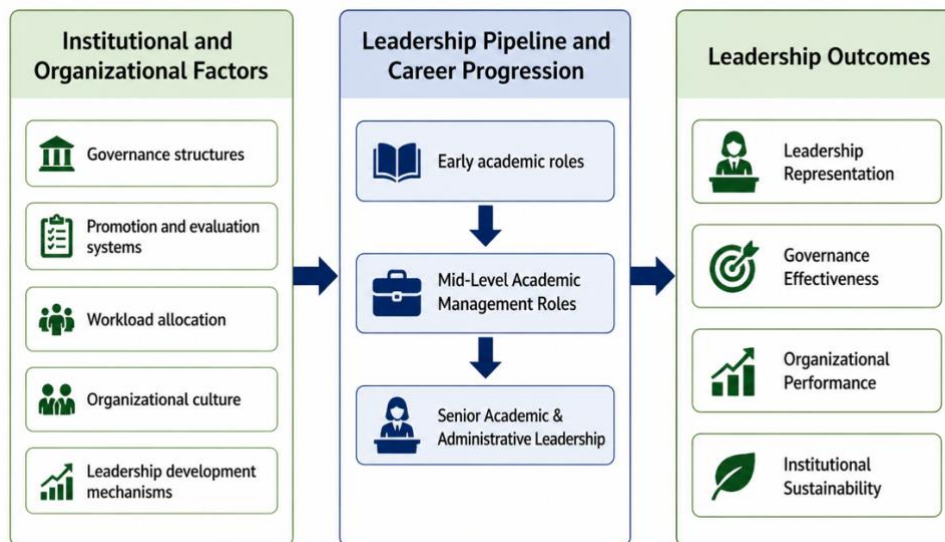
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**Table No.1**

Summary of key management challenges and leadership opportunities in higher education

Dimension	Key Issues Identified	Institutional Practices Observed
Leadership pipeline	Limited access to early leadership roles	Structured leadership pathways
Promotion systems	Emphasis on research over leadership	Transparent evaluation criteria
Organizational culture	Centralized governance, informal norms	Shared leadership arrangements

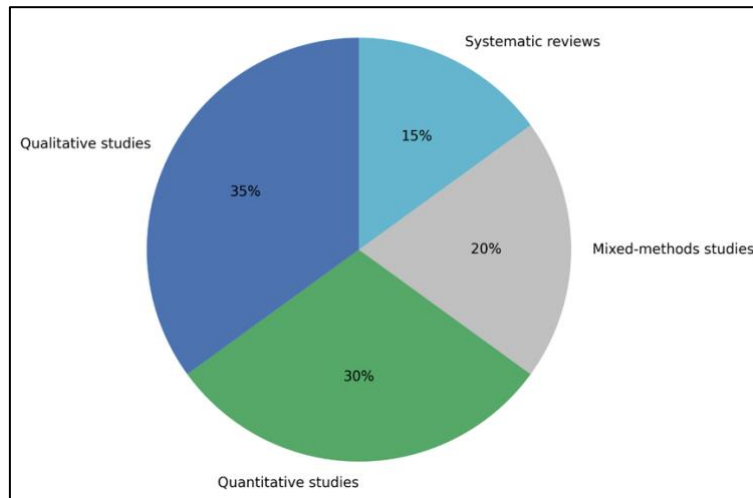
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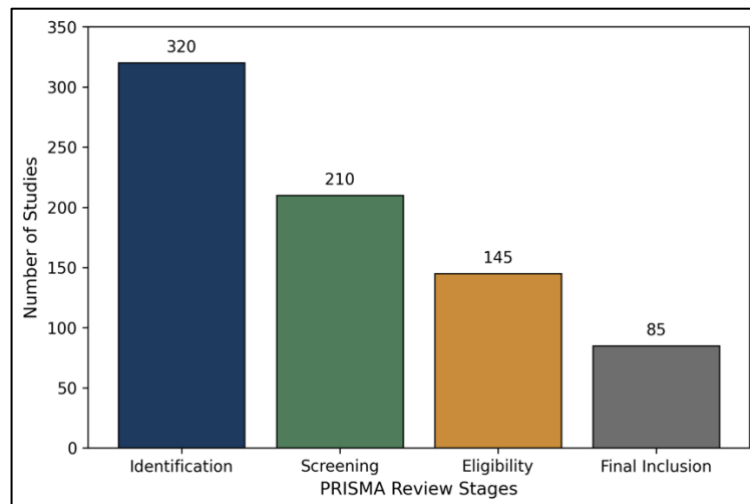
**Figure No.1**

Integrated conceptual framework of women's leadership in higher education

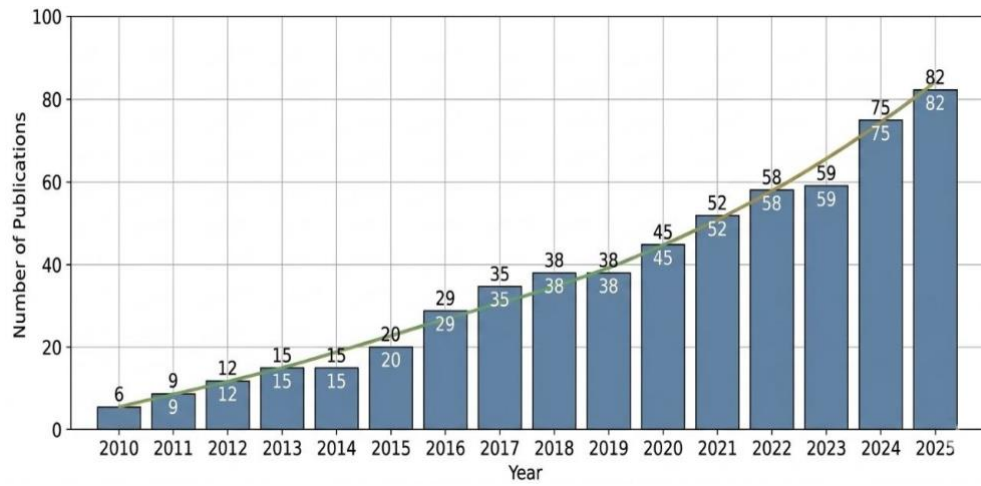
Source: Prepared by the author



**Figure No. 2**  
Distribution of included studies by research design  
*Source: Prepared by the author*



**Figure No. 3**  
Study selection outcomes across PRISMA review stages.  
*Source: Prepared by the author*



**Figure No. 4**

Trends in Publications on Women's Leadership in Higher Education (2010–2025)

*Source: Prepared by the author*