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Strategies and Barriers to Best Practice Leadership Succession Planning in Higher Education

Implications for Gender Equality at Western Sydney University

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Dr Sheree Gregory is a Lecturer in the School of Business at Western Sydney University. Sheree's research focuses on emergent issues surrounding contemporary Australian work/life, gender, equality and leadership in innovation and entrepreneurship, barriers and policy debates. She has jointly edited two books on 'Women and Work' (RMIT 2006, 2007) and published in top tier international journals such as *Entrepreneurship, Theory and Practice*. Since 2018, Sheree has been appointed to an NSW Innovation and Productivity Council sub-committee advising on research about international talent flow of NSW graduates and innovation policy and practice.

Strategies and Barriers to Best Practice Leadership Succession Planning in Higher Education

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Dr Sheree Gregory

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OVERVIEW

Inclusive leadership is critical to innovation and Australia's future. Yet, the underrepresentation of women in leadership in the higher education sector continues to be a major concern in Australia. This report is a research project exploring best practice leadership succession planning approaches and barriers in the Australian higher education sector. The research seeks to support the work of the Office of Equity and Diversity and Vice Chancellor's Gender Equality Committee at Western Sydney University with the knowledge necessary to articulate succession planning initiatives to impact gender equality, leadership and workplace inclusion. The research aims to:

— Investigate best practice succession planning processes in higher education;
— Look at the impact on gender equality, and how processes could be implemented or adapted at Western Sydney University.

This study is underpinned by the notion that succession planning is a critical, contentious and underutilised process for inclusive leadership, business competitiveness and innovation. Qualitative data was collected via interviews with 15 leaders from universities across Australia. Data was obtained on size of organisation; male to female ratio of most senior groups; succession planning experiences, approaches and barriers; strategies for equity, talent identification and management.

Key findings: Qualitative
— Succession planning is new, limited, uneven and not well understood across universities, yet is growing in development
— Strategies for best practice succession planning include adopting new ways of thinking about and approaching leadership and performance management
— Informal and formal succession planning is initiated in a range of ways
— Approaches to succession include HRM directed; driven by industry tools; training, promotion and development focused; performance management; discipline-specific; replacing only key and critical roles; confidential
— University leaders develop succession plans to innovate their work discipline (collective) for the future, and manage their own replacement (individual)
— Barriers to succession planning include not developing a shared vision; not determining the future strategic focus; limited time HR can devote to succession planning outside of the work of the University; the intention of potential successors in contrast with the incumbent
— Strategies for inclusive leadership comprise a prioritised top-down approach; strong messaging about equity and the 'need' for more women applicants in recruitment pools; developing the leadership pipeline internally; adopting and updating initiatives and frameworks that promote equity and diversity
— Fostering an environment that develops leadership and inclusivity within the academic pipeline is an effective practice and sustainable approach

Recommendations

1. **Welcome gender balanced leadership and academic pipeline improvement.** Review the gender balance of the most senior group and academic pipeline. Set targets for achieving gender equity at the most senior group and academic pipeline as a self-sustaining approach, including short-term leadership appointments as part of talent development.

2. **Incentivise evidence-based succession planning.** Develop and implement a Succession Plan Program led and supported by an advisory group: (i) Conduct an *Organisational Leadership Succession Diagnosis* comprised of a Human Resource audit of number and equity-diversity ratio of leaders eligible for retirement in the next 5-years; identify critical roles for succession; identify potential leaders, leadership, diversity and knowledge gaps, training needs; (ii) Encourage leaders to engage with frameworks/tools underpinned by university strategic action plans (for e.g., gender equity frameworks, 9-box talent assessment an succession planning tools), milestones and timelines.

3. **Foster new (where needed) governing structures and systems.** Consider the complex shared governing structures and systems when planning succession. Establish new structures and systems for evaluation, approval of successors and justification for external recruitment for leadership capability.

4. **Welcome quotas.** Identify 50% female and 50% male potential successors. Anticipate vacancies and design protocols when positions are unable to fulfil the diversity and equity prioritisation. Utilise exemptions under Special Measures of the Equal Opportunity Act for recruitment in male-dominated disciplines.

5. **Prioritise resourcing, time and support.** Allocate a working-group comprised of Human Resource specialists/People and Culture and the Office of Diversity and Equity to support succession planning. The working-group will assist in the promotion and encouragement of succession planning among discipline leaders to commence thinking about internal leadership capabilities, needs, and gaps.

6. **Increase participation of leadership in succession planning.** Effective leadership underpins cultural change. The University should proactively identify and set about changing perceptions and removing cultural roadblocks that impede succession planning – this requires the full participation of leadership.

7. **Moving beyond training, promotion and leadership development.** Plan for internal pipeline development by: (i) Offering a *Western Women Leadership Development Program* for hi-potential women leaders aspiring to senior leadership roles across professional and academic staff; (ii) Identifying women for academic promotion, sponsorship, and offer coaching, including support around the application of special measures, and preparing and reviewing applications; (iii) Recognising, celebrating and promoting professional and academic women's excellence via *Women's Research Awards*.

8. **Increase trust and transparency.** Openness and relationships of trust are essential for supporting smooth transitions and enabling successors to get off to a good start.

9. **Prioritise effective practices surrounding inclusive leadership.** Succession planning provides opportunities to implement and review equity and diversity policies to ensure they are effective and suitable for the future. This includes updating the University's gender equity framework underpinned by robust action plans.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The research project is a Targeted Gender Equality Initiative supported by the Vice Chancellor's Gender Equality Committee at Western Sydney University in 2018. The initiative was established to research best practice succession planning across the higher education sector in Australia, in relation to advancing gender equality at Western Sydney University and in commitment to the university's gender equality strategic framework. The research project comprised two parts:

1. Review institutional equity and succession planning frameworks;
2. Collect new data about succession planning via qualitative interviews with executive leaders of universities in Australia.

The research questions guiding the project are:

— What is best practice succession planning in the Australian higher education sector?
— How is best practice succession planning approached in universities?
— What is the relationship between succession planning, gender equality in leadership, career development, and knowledge management practices?
— How can best practice succession planning processes impact gender equality and be implemented/adopted at Western Sydney University?

Outcomes from the research aim to inform and impact Western Sydney University's Gender Equality Agenda and succession planning. The Targeted Gender Equality Initiative intersects with Western Sydney University's Gender and Equality Agenda in four critical ways, it aims to:

— Identify the barriers to women's full and equal participation in executive successor roles in universities;
— Identify strategies for more effective talent identification for women to take up successor roles;
— Identify ineffective practices;
— Gain a deeper understanding of internal versus external leadership dimensions.

Key terms

Succession planning is also known as leadership of talent management and widely recognised in the family business literature, as '. . . the most important issue that most family firms face' (Handler, 1994 in Harvester, Davis and Lyden 1997: 373). It is a replacement strategy or plan for when a leader suddenly departs (for e.g., due to death, illness, unplanned resignation, among others). 'For a family business to outlive its founder, it must experience succession' (Harvester, Davis and Lyden 1997: 373). It is 'pivotal to business continuity, but is often fraught with tension and indefinitely postponed' (Gilding, Gregory and Cosson 2015: 299).
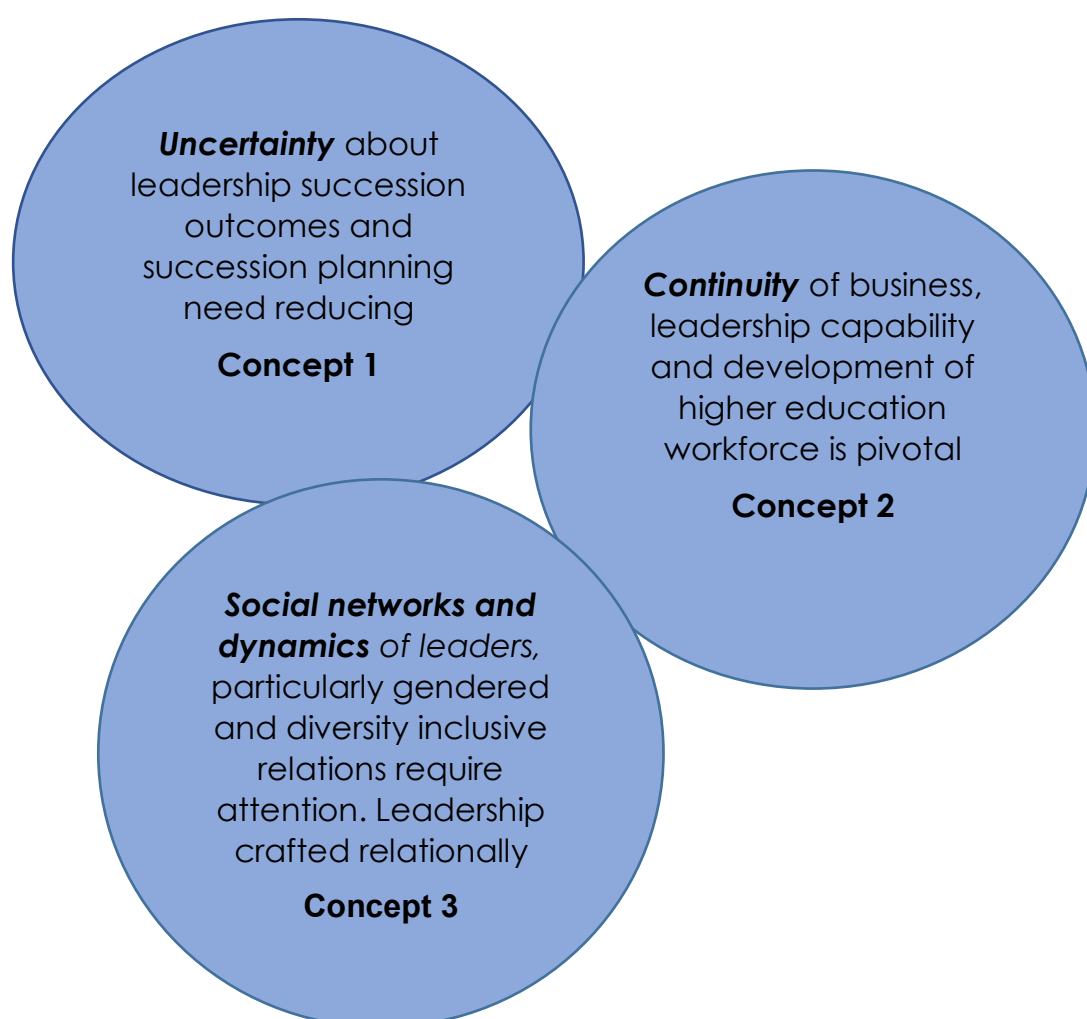
Considering the critique internationally of the term **best practice** (Munro, 2016 [2005])**,** this report recommends the use of the term 'effective practices'.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework was used, comprising three conceptual tools: uncertainty, continuity, and the social dynamics and networks of (current) leaders. Concept one and two are well-documented, they reflect and build on the literature on succession planning (see Gilding, Gregory and Cosson 2015; 2011). Concept three draws upon the interviews with 15 university leaders about succession planning and gender equity in higher education leadership.

The first concept refers to the uncertainty, the lag and the inconsistency in the implementation of a formal succession plan approach by university leadership. Concept two highlights the importance of leadership capability and continuity that is understood among leaders in higher education. Concept three refers to the social networks and dynamics of leaders and how leadership is crafted relationally. It emphasises the need for understanding gendered and inclusive social relations.

FIGURE 1: FRAMEWORK FOR LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION PLANNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Uncertainty about leadership succession outcomes and succession planning need reducing

Concept 1

Continuity of business, leadership capability and development of higher education workforce is pivotal

Concept 2

Social networks and dynamics of leaders, particularly gendered and diversity inclusive relations require attention. Leadership crafted relationally

Concept 3

METHODOLOGY & PARTICIPANTS

A qualitative data strategy was used in this project, comprising 15 interviews with leaders of universities from the position of Dean to the most senior leadership team and Vice Chancellor. Data was collected in 2018 and 2019. In order to find out what happens in universities in succession planning, Human Resource departments, senior executive management groups, the office of Vice Chancellors, Deputy and Pro Vice Chancellors, and Deans of public and private universities were contacted. Over 70 letters of invitation were sent to university leadership across Australia.

Qualitative methodology and interview technique are crucial when asking about people's experiences, plans, decision-making and motivations. University leaders and executives are directly involved in succession planning and their first-hand account provide an 'insider's' perspective (Weick 1995, 1993, 1985), to be able to access what meaning they give to their experience and practices, and what their concerns and hopes are (Hammersley 1992: 45). These intentions indicate why qualitative research is valuable (Crotty 1998). It enables an approach to the main research questions in the same way Minichiello *et al.* (1995: 9) write about when they say they want 'to capture people's meanings, definitions and descriptions of events'. The value of qualitative research, according to Bryman (2004: 277–83), is that it enables the researcher to see through the eyes of the people being studied, obtain descriptive detail based on context, and explore the phenomena under question.

The respondents were selected based on their leadership position. A mix of male and female participants in a range of senior positions were interviewed. Most interviews were conducted in person, with the remainder in teleconference, and one in email. The interviews collected data on size of university; size of leadership team; male to female ratio in leadership team; succession planning in higher education experiences; how universities approach succession planning; decision-making experiences; succession planning processes and practices; uncertainties and barriers to succession planning; when succession does not work, and approaches to gender equality in leadership.

Table 1: Position Characteristics of Participants

Position	Number
Vice Chancellor	3
Pro Vice Chancellor	4
Chief Financial Officer	1
Executive Director / VP	5
Dean / Executive Dean	3
Total	*16

*Denotes one participant in two roles

KEY FINDINGS

1. Women's participation in senior leadership in higher education

A roughly even number of male and female participants took part in interviews (seven males and eight females). Of the six participants holding professional (or non-academic) senior leadership positions (such as Chief Financial Officer, Human Resources Director or Human Resources Executive Director, among others), five were female. Of the three participants holding Vice Chancellor positions, one was female.

The **strategies and effective practices that enable** women's participation in leadership in higher education, reported by leaders include: prioritising gender equity in messaging and recruitment practices from the top-down wherein leaders explicitly communicate the 'need' for more women to be included in a recruitment pool; inclusive workplace culture and strong messaging about inclusive workplace culture; keeping the door open to previous external applicants to widen the pool of potential candidates, and developing formal leadership training implemented internally.

Across the Australian higher education sector, women continue to be underrepresented in Vice Chancellor positions (Redmond *et al.*, 2017) and remain concentrated at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. At the national level, workforce participation data compiled by Universities Australia in 2016 (Table 2) shows that most professional staff in higher education are women and more women are employed at lower levels of academic positions.

Table 2: Women's Participation in Senior Levels, Professional and Academic, 2016

Proportion of women professional and academic staff	2016
Women in Professional staff positions • All professional staff positions • Senior professional at HEW level 10 and above	 66.3% 48.7%
Women in Academic staff positions • All academic staff positions • Senior academic staff at Level D • Senior academic staff at Level E and above	 45.2% 37.2% 27.3%

*Source: Universities Australia, '2016 elected inter-institutional gender equity statistics', August 2017, p. 4'.

Data on higher education staff numbers for 2017 to 2018 (Table 3) show women continue to be underrepresented in senior academic positions at Levels D and above, across 39 universities. These senior levels represent the foundation for senior leadership.

Table 3: Women's Participation in Level D, E and above (combined), 2017-2018

Gender	2017	2018
Female	5,151 (32%)	5,200 (34%)
Male	10,768 (68%)	10,149 (66%)
Total	15,919	15,349

*Source: Data from Australian Govt. Department of Education, 'Higher education staff numbers', 2018.

Despite gender equity interventions in the higher education sector, the number of women in senior academic positions in Australia has not significantly increased since 2016. These poor gender equity outcomes were reflected in some interviews when it was reported that to some extent, the current gender imbalance is also shaped by decisions made by grant bodies which impact proportionally on research intensive universities.

2. Succession planning in higher education today

Succession planning is newly developed and not yet widespread

Succession planning is a relatively new, unevenly and inconsistently developed practice with limited understanding across universities in Australia today. However, it is a practice that leaders are indeed being thoughtful around and continue to develop.

Formal and informal succession planning practices are utilised

A range of formal and informal succession planning practices are currently utilised in universities. For instance, from conversations about career planning and development, coaching, shadowing, participation in programs and networks, acting in short-term roles, to 360-degree diagnostics, executive remuneration frameworks, gender equity frameworks, nine box or grid talent assessment tools. Some leaders implement bold and innovative succession planning practices via their own systems aligned with capacity building, workforce and developing a culture. Some leaders utilise frameworks from industry to build detailed succession planning charts. Most leaders recognised their inclusion in a past succession planning process, being groomed for a potential role of successor at some point in their careers.

New approaches work best

Some higher education leaders reflected that new approaches are most effective in succession planning and management, rather than keeping on with past practices. For example, identifying future potential leaders, followed by working out what to do to retain and develop leaders in order to grow internal bench strength. The latter would result in new processes and conversations that look and feel different to past processes. Moreover, as part of the succession process, there is work to do around succession management and the management of perceptions upon new appointments.

Universities take a range of approaches to succession planning and management. These include from:

— Human Resource, training and development

- performance management
- discipline-specific
- critical role-specific
- balancing professional and academic staff leadership capabilities
- confidential approach.

Most leaders are proactive in initiating succession planning in their areas and teams with a focus on balancing both a future vision of their work domains and disciplines (collective) and their own replacement (individual).

3. Barriers to succession planning in higher education

The barriers to succession planning include:
- A limited range of strategic Human Resource Management tools at the disposal of universities that corporates may have access to
- Attempting to develop a succession plan for every role in the organisation
- Not developing a shared vision
- A lack of support from Human Resources function
- The limited time Human Resource departments can devote to succession planning outside of the work of university
- Not determining the future strategic focus
- The intention of potential successors contrasting with incumbent's intentions
- The challenge of forecasting and a future vision.

It was clear that there needs to be:
- Appropriate expertise to be thinking about talent
- Top-down support from the Vice Chancellor
- Selecting only key and critical roles for succession planning
- Thoughtful engagement and early development of succession planning
- Incentive for succession planning
- Focus on cultivating effective practices.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive leadership is critical to innovation and Australia's future, yet, gender equity in the tertiary workforce is still a problem (Redmond *et al.*, 2017). Studies on succession planning in higher education in Australia and effective practices are relatively new. This research has identified two areas of further study which are rare in the literature:

- How leaders manage succession and leadership change;
- Inclusive leadership ecosystem in higher education.

This research project will soon be expanded. The next phase will be the development of a Succession Planning Toolkit: Best Practice Guidelines for inclusive leadership. Moreover, in 2019 there has been interest in the findings among university human resource leaders in the USA, prompting a comparative case study of succession planning, management strategies and effective practices with the USA and Australia.

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