



University of Canberra

**An Exploration of Career Experiences
of Women University Presidents in China**

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Abstract

Academic leadership development has now become a critical issue in higher education globally. Leaders with exceptional capabilities are needed to help higher education institutions meet extraordinary challenges in the changing times. There is also an urgent need for women academics to play increasingly important roles in terms of providing effective and high calibre leadership and management. A better understanding of women university presidents' career experiences is of great value in meeting these challenges.

A review of the existing literature suggests highly varied experiences and very diverse pathways which women academic leaders have taken. Some research on women academic leaders has been conducted mainly in English-speaking Western countries such as USA, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. The review of relevant literature has concentrated largely on career pathway, career development, career barriers, and career challenges of women academic leaders in Western universities. Some important gender perspectives, such as, gender identity, difference and equity, have been taken into account in explaining the career experiences of women academic leaders. However, limited research has examined careers of senior women academic leaders in China's higher education. There arises a need for exploring career experiences and development of Chinese women academic leaders who have attained high leadership positions, such as university presidents. This research aims to address the gap identified in the literature and give due recognition to the role of women academic leaders in the contemporary China's higher education. This research aims to provide insights into Chinese women university presidents' careers and their interpretations of those experiences, particularly related to development of knowledge, skills, and competencies required for successful leadership. The fundamental approach is to gain a deeper understanding of their career experiences and the meanings they attached to these experiences. The nature of this qualitative research is exploratory. Women presidents from elite universities in China participate in this research through in-depth interviews. Participants reflect and tell stories of their career experiences in the context of their own life circumstances and realities. This research seeks to contribute to the field of educational leadership by exploring women university presidents' career experiences in China. The research into their experiences is expected to provide a deeper understanding of Chinese women academic leaders and inform future research on women academic leadership development in other cultural contexts.

The researcher's articulation through rich stories of women's leadership experiences is both moving and telling. This is a contribution that promises to transform both the leading of universities and the preparation of those who will lead them. This study examines the special qualities that women bring to leadership roles and show how these attitudes, characteristics, and capacities can be used to improve the practice and training of educational leadership for women. The themes are illustrated throughout by insightful narratives of women presidents. The researcher identifies and explores the essence of leadership grounded in women's experiences and bridged the gap between China and Western countries. Out of these women's career experiences is an intriguing exploration of leadership and management that holds the promise of initiating significant and positive changes.

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I am grateful to eighteen women university presidents for their invaluable contributions. They have shared with me parts of their life and career stories. It is my hope that the findings of this research would in turn contribute to help those who inspire to tread the path of a senior academic career.

Let us celebrate the successes of the presidents who have made the grade in academia, be inspired and look forward to many more women presidents to come in China.

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