Constance Zulu & Eleanor Lemmer

Women as department chairs at universities in South Africa and Britain

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The article reports on the findings of a qualitative inquiry into the lived experiences of a small sample of women chairs at universities in South Africa and Britain selected by purposeful sampling. Data were collected by means of video conference focus group interviews. Findings indicated that women department chairs require managerial competencies: rigorous scholarship as well as certain structures and procedures are necessary for the smooth management of a department. They face broader contextual issues in higher education owing to change, and the dual role influences their career experiences.

Vroue as departementele voorsitters aan Suid-Afrikaanse en Britse universiteite

Hierdie artikel rapporteer oor 'n kwalitatiewe ondersoek na die bestuurservarings van vroulike voorsitters aan geselekteerde universiteite in Suid-Afrika en Brittanje, geïdentifiseer volgens doelgerigte steekproefneming. Data is met fokusgroeponderhoude per videokonferensie ingesamel. Die bevindings dui daarop dat vroulike voorsitters van departemente 'n behoefte het aan spesifieke bestuursvaardighede: nougesette vakkundigheid asook sekere strukture en prosedures is noodsaaklik vir effektiewe bestuur van 'n departement. Hulle het te kampe met breër kontekstuele vraagstukke weens verandering in hoëronderwys, en hul dubbele rol beïnvloed hul loopbaanervarings.

Dr C B Zulu, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, North-West University, Private Bag X2046, Mmabatho 2735 & Prof E M Lemmer, College of Social Sciences, University of South Africa, P O Box 392, Unisa 0003; E-mail: Connie.Zulu@nwu.ac.za & lemmeem@unisa.ac.za

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In recent years researchers in the field of management studies have paid increasing attention to women in leadership in higher education. However, despite burgeoning interest in the role of women who are university presidents[1] and non-academic administrators (King 1997), few studies have focused exclusively on the experiences of women department chairs at universities.[2] The department chair has a complex role to play in giving direction, maintaining order and initiating change in the academic department. As Sarros *et al* (1999: 165) point out, nearly 80% of all administrative decisions in higher education are made at the departmental level by the chair. Department chairs thus play a pivotal role in ensuring programme quality and institutional viability. Chairs comprise the academic leaders closest in the institution to the delivery of instructional services, and can thus make a substantial difference to and impact on the intellectual caliber of an institution (Bennett 1998: 135). As academic leaders, chairs are required to provide direction as well as initiate movement and change within the discipline (Ramsden 1998: 108). Men overwhelmingly outnumber women in the position of department chair (Carroll 1991, Zulu 2007) despite few gains made by women in recent years (Carroll 2004). Gender continues to influence the career paths of women in academe in terms of promotion, tenure and access to influential management positions, such as that of chair.[3]

Against this background, the main research question addressed in this article is: How do women who are appointed as department chairs at universities experience their role? The question was investigated by an inquiry into the experiences of a small sample of

1 Cf Jones 1997, Walton 1997, Masden 2007, Waring 2003.

2 A comprehensive search of local and international databases has identified a body of research on women acting as heads of department in schooling systems or as non-academic administrators in universities (Gupton & Slick 1996, King 1997). Studies exclusively devoted to women department chairs in universities are uncommon; however, cognisance was taken of studies on department chairs which included a gender perspective (Carroll 1991 & 2004, Sarros *et al* 1999, Taliaferro 2007).

3 Cf Astin & Davis 1993, Bagilhole 2003, Brown 1997, Ginther & Kahn 2004: 193.

women department chairs at selected universities in South Africa and Britain using a combined quantitative and qualitative approach (Zulu 2007). This article reports on only the latter. Although South Africa's higher education system comprises fewer universities than that of Britain, department chairs serve in similar pivotal decision-making positions in both countries, and the institutions in which they function face converging challenges in the global context of higher education (Lemmer 2001). In addition, in both countries women chairs are an exception rather than the rule despite equity policies and legislation (Zulu 2007).

1. Literature review

As early as the 1950s the literature dealing with university administration drew attention to the decisive role played by the department chair at universities (Woodburne 1958). Studies focusing exclusively on the functioning of the department chair were done by Tucker (1981, 1984 & 1992) but no specific attention was paid to the gender of the incumbent, presumably because a woman chair was an exception. Tucker (1984) found that the position of department chair is associated with numerous roles and responsibilities. Chairs have the authority and responsibility to influence university policies and procedures; recommend academic staff for appointments, promotion and tenure; control budgets, work allocation and teaching timetables, and establish the culture of a department. Increasingly, department chairs act to represent their department and faculty to the rest of the university, to professional organisations and to groups outside the university (Carroll 2004: 671). Hecht *et al* (1999: 17) describe the latter development as a shift in the role of department chair from "a manager focused internally on the department [...] to a leader within the university, and even within the larger society". As the first-line administrator, the department chair becomes the key link between the administration of the institution, the department, academic staff, support staff and students. Bowman (2002: 161) argues that the fulfilment of the chair's role requires a diverse set of leadership skills: effective communication skills, problem-solving skills, conflict-management skills; mentoring and coaching skills, and

transition-management skills. The chair is also expected to give the discipline represented by the department its specific institutional shape, texture or colour (Hecht *et al* 1999: 13) and to provide intellectual leadership to peers. In addition, as academic leaders, many department chairs keep up rigorous personal agendas and publish frequently (Carroll & Gmelch 1994: 51). The department chair is also expected to facilitate and encourage the work of the individual and of the group, be a servant of the group who embraces the group's values and goals, and be a leader who inspires and leads personnel by creating a positive climate in the department. The department chair is also expected to attract resources to the department and manage conflict, in particular during times of change. This role therefore includes academic and administrative dimensions and is accompanied by a certain amount of stress (Gmelch & Burns 1994). In assuming the position of chair, the department chair faces many transitions, such as making the transition from specialist to generalist, from focusing on one's discipline to representing a broader range of inquiries within the department, and from being an individual to considering a whole departmental operation (Bennett 1998: 134). The more theoretical literature on the role of department chair is elucidated by large-scale empirical studies of the career paths of chairs (Carroll 1991); chairs' personal perceptions and experiences of leadership (Seagren *et al* 1994); stress related to the position of chair (Sarros *et al* 1999), and comparative studies between chairs in different countries (Sarros *et al* 1999, Taliaferro 2007). Some of these studies bring the dimension of gender to bear, albeit somewhat cursorily, on the role of department chair (Carroll 1991, Taliaferro 2007). As mentioned, studies exclusively devoted to women chairs at universities are rare. However, research on the position of university president suggests that the position of department chair may be an important rung on the ladder to the most prestigious position in academe, the university president (vice-chancellor or rector) (Masden 2007).

2. Research design

Against this background, an empirical inquiry was undertaken, using a combined quantitative and qualitative approach into the experiences of women department chairs at four universities in South Africa and three in Britain (Zulu 2007). This article reports on only the qualitative component which sought to describe the lived experiences of participants as chairs. Creswell (2007: 236) defines lived experiences as "individual experiences of people as conscious human beings". In this instance, the term relates to the manner in which the participants individually experienced the path that led them to the position of chair and the challenges they faced therein. Six participants from South Africa and three from Britain were selected by judgement sampling. The latter locates information-rich individuals, that is, those who are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena under investigation (Johnson & Christensen 2000: 180). In this instance, all participants had a minimum of at least two years' experience as department chair. South African participants were from the universities of Pretoria, Cape Town, Western Cape and Fort Hare (Alice and East London campuses). The British participants hailed from the University of Bristol, London King's College and London's Imperial College. The size of the sample (nine participants) depended on logistical constraints: the availability of appropriate participants, the accessibility of participants, and the costs of locating and enlisting participation (Bogdan & Biklen 1982: 2). Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and participation was voluntary. Invitation to participate in the study was done telephonically or by e-mail.

Data were gathered by means of three focus group interviews with mixed groups of South African and British participants, and one individual interview. According to Krueger & Casey (2000: 83), the intent of focus groups interviews is not to generalise but to provide insights about how people in the groups perceive a situation. All interviews were conducted as video conferences. A video conference is defined as a meeting or conversation held between people at different locations relying on full motion video technology as a primary communication link, whereby participants can see and hear one another on the video screen (University of Plymouth *s a*). The technology

allowed participants from different countries and institutions to interact freely in a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere. Permission to use the video conference facilities was obtained from each participating university's video conference facility manager. Participants were notified by e-mail regarding the time and venue two weeks prior to the interview sessions. A semi-structured interview schedule was e-mailed to participants prior to the interview to orientate them. Interviews followed the interview schedule (Lee & Fielding 2004: 533), albeit in a very flexible manner. The following topics were covered: career path; motivation for aspiring to the position of chair; necessary skills and abilities; specific challenges encountered in the position, and the impact of the dual role (domestic and professional). The researcher's role was to facilitate the discussion, to ensure the topics were covered, as well as to probe and encourage equal participation from participants. The interviews lasted two hours, respectively and were recorded on videotape. The researcher also took notes to be used in conjunction with the videotaped material. After each interview, the videotape was viewed by the researcher in order to adjust subsequent sessions.

Data analysis followed Krueger & Casey's (2000) transcript-based data capturing and analysis. Notes taken in the interview were examined and filed according to topic. The videotapes were transcribed *verbatim*. Where clarification or additional information was required, an e-mail requesting information was sent to the participant. Thereafter, the researcher formally identified themes as suggested by the data and demonstrated support for those themes (Delamont 2002: 171). By closely reading and re-reading the transcripts in conjunction with the notes, tentative themes were identified. First, relevant extracts in the text were highlighted and then grouped without comment under themes (Delamont 2002: 172). Thereafter, the themes were clustered into categories and compared with the relevant literature (LeCompte & Preissle 1993: 267). Finally, suitable extracts from the responses were paraphrased or suitable quotations were selected as rich data to illustrate the categories (LeCompte & Preissle 1993: 267). The draft findings were distributed to all participants for cross-checking and further elaboration or explanation where necessary.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Critical leadership and management skills

The participants regarded both managerial and academic competencies as critical to their career success and their functioning as department chairs. Effective department chairs are first and foremost academic leaders and should have a strong reputation in their field and a sound grasp of the discipline they represent (Gupton & Slick 1996). Two participants emphasised that "a very broad knowledge base of your subject and associated subjects" and "skill in the profession of which you are a member" are essential. Similarly, Masden (2007: 88) found that "degrees and scholarly pedigrees" earn women leaders and managers in academe respect from the faculty constituency. All participants agreed emphatically that they considered themselves academic leaders before they considered themselves line managers, while recognising that a department chair requires both academic leadership and line management skills in order to function effectively. Smith (2002: 296) agrees that in statutory universities in Britain, the two elements (leadership and line management) were considered of approximately equal importance.

The majority of the participants then identified the interpersonal skills required to establish and maintain good relationships as the most important skill in leading and managing the department. One participant remarked: "You need to know a lot about people". Another confirmed that considerable time is spent dealing with colleagues and students each day: "High on my list of success factors are negotiation skills [...] be patient and also assertive and persistent. You have to show people you will win, and that's the way forward." Other participants mentioned "interpersonal communication skills and the ability to be consistent with a large number of people". Similarly, participants in Taliaferro's (2007) study considered skills related to communication as most important. One participant in the present study stressed the ability to work well not only with peers and students but also with top university management and public stakeholders. The participants mentioned other tasks, also identified by Smith (2002), such as being part of the senior management team

at the university; issues relating to labour law (mentioned by the British participants, in particular); contract negotiating skills; conflict and dispute resolution skills, and university governance.

One participant ascribed her career success to the ability to be innovative and to multitask "because you have a lot of different things on your table all day, you can't book out the whole day for one thing only". Several participants referred to the willingness to work hours that extended far beyond the normal workday. The most time-consuming tasks listed included chairing and attending meetings, compiling departmental budgets, paperwork such as daily correspondence, electronic and written, writing reports and filling in forms and quality assessment tasks. Similarly, Smith (2002: 302) found that "paperwork and bureaucracy" followed by "managing personnel" and "meetings" were the most time-consuming tasks for department chairs. Another skill frequently mentioned by the participants was financial management. Department chairs may find budgeting tedious but managing a budget is unavoidable. Participants frequently mentioned that this was a new skill which had to be acquired rapidly while on the job. Related to this is the increasingly important role of fundraiser: "sourcing external funding, promoting the faculty outside the university" and "meeting a lot of people and talking to businessmen".

The participants preferred a democratic, consultative and team-based leadership style. This corroborates Gupton & Slick's (1996) research in which women administrators described their leadership style as transformational rather than transactional. All the participants in this study characterised their style of leadership in terms that described a transformational rather than an authoritarian type of leadership. A participant declared that she is "definitely not authoritarian, but more facilitative". Another endorsed, "I am the opposite of autocratic [...] I am participative [...] I'm a team person. I believe in doing things through people". However, some participants felt that the position of department chair also required uncharacteristically male behaviour: "Some masculine type attributes tend to grow on you with the role although you don't set out to be like that [...] such as being more assertive, being more decisive, more of a risk taker".

Finally, in such a complex leadership and management position, coping with stress is essential (Gmelch & Burns 1994). All participants admitted to having to manage pressure continually, for which there is no easy panacea; all rely on more than one coping mechanism. Strategies mentioned were relying on supportive spouses, partners, friends or colleagues who help by listening sympathetically or by providing a springboard for ideas; family life in general; care of pets; weekend leisure activities; prioritising and delegating, as well as practising self-reflection.

3.2 The role of supportive institutional factors

Certain structural factors should be in place in the department and at the institution to facilitate the work of the department chair, including an environment in which regular meetings can be held, structures and procedures to make new staff appointments, an efficient personal assistant or departmental secretary to provide administrative support and manage one's diary, and a well-qualified and stable faculty. At institutional level, participants identified other factors as helpful in their work: leadership training, increases in research income and subsequent flexibility of funding, and a strategic fund which departments could access in order to support departmental activities. Factors that hinder the department chair's work are lack of resources and an overcrowded programme. A participant gave an example of a lack of technology: "I didn't really have somebody to help with IT or web design – those are very important things to have at universities". Another participant stressed a lack of time: "The factor that hinders me most at departmental level is time. If I had more time [...] I have overloaded myself by taking on too much." Participants also complained about the lack of training for management, financial constraints, rigid policies and procedures as well as bureaucratic red tape. The latter is aptly described in the following lament:

> Sometimes you have to talk to about twenty people to get to the right person to answer your questions. You have to fill in hundreds of forms just to get somebody appointed. It can take about three months.

In addition, participants in both countries have to cope with the demands of a constantly changing higher education environment.

The participants all mentioned the impact of the "new managerialism" in academe, that is, the increasing application of the business, profit-making model to the university (Simkins 2005: 13-4). They found this new trend frustrating, and emphasised that employers and employees relate very differently in industry and in higher education. They felt that processes from industry cannot be imported wholesale into the academic environment even if they work well in the corporate world. A participant with wide and lengthy experience in various managerial positions in industry remarked: "You can't just import, you absolutely can't just import processes from industry to the university." Associated with this is the practice of using consultants from business and industry in universities. Unfortunately, their solutions to university problems often fail to produce the desired effect in academe.

The emphasis on performativity or the technical criterion applied to the university also frustrates academics (Ryder 1996). As a result of the emphasis on quality assurance and the measurement of performativity, department chairs find themselves inundated with exhausting, time-consuming and frequently irrelevant paperwork. According to participants, impersonal attention to numerous forms appears to have replaced personal fostering of relationships between department chair and staff and between staff and students. One participant gave the following example: instead of investigating directly why a postgraduate supervisor is not meeting his/her students, management has devised a system of monitoring performativity by means of forms to be completed at every meeting. This "mechanises" the relationships between students and their supervisors and impoverishes the quality of the academic processes. A British participant mentioned:

> We've had a huge government interest in measuring quality in universities in the UK [...] importing the kind of quality management processes that industry was getting rid of ten years ago. We've imported all that into the university and it really gets the academic staff down.

However, in her experience, one participant found that employees in industry had been less resistant to change than academics. Returning to academe, she was surprised by change resistance from academics:

"Here are people who in their research are pushing forward the frontiers [...] yet you start changing the colour of the corridors and they get nervous!" What is significant, according to the women's observations, is the gender difference in dealing with change. Two participants agreed that the women in the faculty generally seemed to handle change more easily than the men. They were more flexible in embracing change and moving with it.

In South African universities, policies of transformation driven by political imperatives are prominent, among others, to achieve proportional representation of all races in all sectors of universities. One participant felt that this presented unique challenges to the department chair. New appointments and promotions were accomplished too rapidly, resulting in "very inexperienced people in very senior jobs". This situation included the position of department chair where appointments were made for symbolic value rather than to promote the interests of the department. Whereas in South African universities, transformation and change may present challenges of the nature described above, that is not the case in Britain. In the experience of one British participant, the tendency is to promote outstanding academics to the position of department chair on the basis of academic excellence but without adequate management skills, in particular interpersonal skills. When confronted with controversial issues requiring leadership, they tend to "duck out" and do not deal with the issues. Promotions to administrative posts are also made "without the full skills set", albeit for different reasons.

3.3 Training needs

Leadership training specially designed for academic leaders and managers is rare (cf Eble 1990, Comer *et al* 2002, Taliaferro 2007). Therefore, the finding that none of the participants had had any specific formal preparation for the job was not unexpected. However, some of the women had attended general workshops and courses on management and leadership presented by consultants in business and industry. They expressed different views with regard to training. According to the two British participants, general management training for university staff in Britain is usually done by an external agency which

offers courses in leadership and change management, and these programmes seldom fit the needs of the academic environment satisfactorily. Nevertheless, one of these courses introduced her to a useful learning strategy, that of "shadowing" a senior manager. The other British participant had had no specific training but currently has a formal mentor, an executive coach, who helps her. The other participants mentioned that besides attending workshops dealing with specific aspects of university policy, they had had to rely for help on other department chairs, and to learn on the job.

Some participants believed that on-the-job experience was the best training. One participant firmly believed that "experience is the best teacher". Similarly, another participant felt that learning actively in the field worked better than learning about it. She regarded workshops and courses as good for networking and listening to other people's experiences, but stated that learning on the job is the best way to find out what you do not know. Another participant had had no training but claimed that her age (and life experience) had helped her. She believed that one learnt the job through trial and error. Another participant stressed the particular need for training in communication skills as it related to managerial tasks in contrast with communication in teaching. She commented:

> The level of training and skill that leaders in universities need in communication [...] is actually higher than it is in industry and yet it's that kind of training which is almost absent in universities. It's assumed that these people can communicate because they can go into a presentation in a conference. But actually communication on the level of addressing people's anxieties is very different from communication at a level of telling about the latest research idea.

3.4 The gender act

Being a woman in the position of department chair remains a minority position at most universities worldwide. Participants weighed the advantages and disadvantages of gender carefully. One participant felt that women department chairs are more empathetic than men as they are more willing to listen to the problems of faculty, including personal dilemmas; are better at handling junior staff, and "know how to get on with other women". Being outnumbered by

male department chairs was often regarded as an asset rather than a liability. One participant remarked with humour:

> It has been an advantage to be a woman. When you come into a board meeting or when you have to address board members and so on, you find that as a woman you are looked upon with curiosity. In fact you're given more attention than the men would have been given. I don't find that an impediment, on the contrary.

Another participant found that when she was first appointed, it had been rare to have a woman department chair. However, as a scientist, she had enjoyed considerable contact with male colleagues and had an easy relationship with men: "I became one of them [...] I'm one of the guys [...] I don't see any negative attitude". Only one participant found that male colleagues were uneasy about taking instructions from a woman and they thus undermined her authority at every turn. She commented:

> The men do not always take me seriously. Especially when I'm sitting in a meeting with 30 male department chairs. If I make a suggestion, I have to be sort of very assertive, not my personality. Otherwise I get ignored [...] if you're sort of too strict to especially the men, they think that – sorry to use the word – you are a bitch.

All women felt that gender played a definite role in the accommodation of their dual roles, domestic and work. One participant had to delegate the children's transport to school to her husband; another gave up voluntary work as a committee member. The job required most participants to work longer hours at the university and, in particular, to attend evening events. Balancing professional and home life is possible with the support of partners who share the domestic workload. One participant purchased a flat in the city where the university is located and returns home to a nearby village only at weekends; before her promotion she commuted daily to work.

With regard to championing other women's rights, only two participants felt obliged to promote other women. One stated: "I do like to do what I can to support women because there aren't enough of us at this college and I think it would be a healthier environment if the balance of women and men was better. So I do champion the cause of women". Another agreed:

> I think it is very important to me as a woman to help to champion the cause of women – help other people, disabled people, minority and ethnic people and fight against exclusion or feel like a diversity champion.

The other participants were of the view that they would be prepared to help a woman in exceptional cases but they did not wish to be associated with the perception that a woman in authority is automatically expected to "fight for women's rights". A participant expressed this sentiment succinctly: "I think it's a mistake: that every time a woman gets into a leadership position, she should now basically champion the cause of woman only". This finding is not surprising as women in senior management seldom regard themselves as feminists (Reay & Ball 2000: 147, Johnson 1993).

3.5 Advice to aspiring women leaders and managers in academe

In their study Gupton & Slick (1996: 148) found that the vast majority of women in university management recommended the aspiring female administrator to believe that "you can do it". However, an aspiring female administrator should work wisely; if she was too aggressive, she could defeat her purpose. All the participants in the present study shared similar words of wisdom. They encouraged the aspiring women department chair to "Go for it!"; "Have confidence and believe in yourself", and "Build a good team around you". One participant encouraged women to be as confident as their male colleagues. Another emphasised confidence in one's own competence. Others mentioned the importance of networking, and another raised the issue of finding a good mentor. A mentor does not necessarily have to be a woman. It was explained that:

> Where there aren't many women in senior roles […] many of the bright young women coming through in this organisation should have male mentors because they […] recognise the opportunities and advise and support women and go forward for them.

A woman with a male mentor may stand a better chance of being exposed to available opportunities, advice and support. Another participant felt that for mentoring to be effective, mentors must be

trained and a system of matching mentor and mentee is necessary because "mentoring is some very special spark that happens. You can't put two people together in a room and then hope. It has to come from within, from both mentor and the mentee." Consistent with Brooks' (1997: 55) findings, mentoring is an important strategy for a woman's career development but implementation can pose a problem, especially with regard to the selection of a mentor. The scarcity of women in senior roles (Gupton & Slick 1996: 90) makes it difficult to find enough mentors for "women by women" and places a heavy burden on the few senior women available. Aspiring women must therefore be proactive and flexible in their choice of a mentor.

4. Conclusion

The findings suggest a close similarity in the experiences of women department chairs in Britain and South Africa despite geographic location and the longer history of workplace equity legislation and practice in Britan. For both groups of women, scholarship, and thus academic leadership, is the defining feature of the chair. This and the inherent nature of the university as an organisation distinguish the position from similar positions in middle management in business and industry. In addition, the experience of women chairs is affected by family commitments, local and international issues of higher education transformation and restructuring, and the specific leadership and management skills linked to the job. Notwithstanding the complex nature of the department chair's role and the challenges the participants often face in the execution of their duties, the women in the study preferred a democratic, consultative and team-based leadership style. This, coupled with a natural predisposition to nurturing, empathy and sharing typical of feminine leadership (Ramsay 2002), makes women well suited to the type of environment advocated by today's organisations. Universities would do well, therefore, to create an environment conducive to the nurturing, professional development and support of women chairs.

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