AUTHOR:
Dr. Nthuna Juliet Ramohai[1] iD
Dr. Somarie Holtzhausen[2] iD

AFFILIATION:
[1]Durban University of Technology, South Africa

[2]University of the Free State, South Africa

Academic women departmental heads' coping mechanisms during COVID-19: A capabilities approach perspective

Abstract

This paper explored women departmental heads' leadership experiences in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper highlighted aspects of their care and coping mechanisms in terms of them working in virtual spaces. Most scholars have examined employees' effects and challenges while working from home during a lockdown. However, most studies are silent on women in leadership, especially concerning the provision of resources to enhance effective leadership during this crisis. The paper draws on three concepts of Sen's Capabilities approach: functionings, freedoms, and agency. This approach facilitates an incisive understanding of institutional and individual coping mechanisms that might be beneficial for women leaders to mitigate the challenges of the devastating COVID-19 lockdowns. The qualitative narrative approach, supported by a feminist lens, provides a critical, in-depth understanding of the real-life stories of women in leadership positions when making-sense of their challenges in working in a virtual environment. Data which was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten female heads of department, was analysed thematically by applying the Capabilities Approach as an analytical tool. The findings indicated that functionings and freedoms are inextricably intertwined to institutional ethnographies. These ethnographies might support or hamper the coping capabilities of women leaders in academic institutions, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

1. Background

COVID-19 was reportedly first detected in Wuhan, China in 2019; and this progressed to a global pandemic, which spread to South Africa only in March 2020 (Giandhari *et al.*, 2020). Governments in all countries rushed to find ways and means to protect people from the deadly pandemic (Jakovljevic *et al.,* 2020). Globally, lockdowns were imposed to minimise physical contact among people which led to most workers transitioning from working in offices to working from home. Kniffin *et al.* (2020) who highlight the impact of

the pandemic on employees and organisations, describe disruptions in normal work practices, economic repercussions, and social instabilities. Working from home became a new normal for the working class around the world (Mcpherson, 2020). In education, it involved learning new skills to access online and virtual learning platforms which replaced face-to-face classroom teaching-learning environments. In South Africa, this migration to online strategies of teaching and learning affected all spheres of education, including higher education institutions (HEIs) that responded by developing capacity-building initiatives to upskill workers for online work environments (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021; International Labour Office, 2021). Such skills development initiatives included webinars on how to effectively conduct lessons online, online meeting management, and online management of administrative duties, amongst others (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021; International Labour Office, 2021). While such initiatives could have been helpful, scholars argue that these efforts did not realistically provide a smooth transition to working online for a multiple of reasons (Mangolothi, 2021; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020). Studies conducted during the pandemic in different parts of the world indicated a plethora of challenges that HEI staff had to contend with (Mangolothi, 2021; International Labour Organisation, 2020).

2. Research interest

Generally, women leaders in academia were challenged by virtue of their positions (Ramohai, 2019; Sherpered, 2017) regarding the debilitating effects of the pandemic. Studies by Rhyan and Haslam (2005) and Sabharwal (2013) assert that deep-rooted cultural and political barriers plague the higher education institutions at all times. These challenges emanate from the hostile socio-political gender-related discourses in higher education that discriminate against women as leaders in HEIs (Sherpered, 2017; Ellemers, 2018). Women leaders execute their roles in planning and monitoring the curriculum, teaching and learning, financial management, and staff development. In addition to these roles, women leaders have to shoulder heavy teaching responsibilities.

When COVID-19 disrupted the higher education sector, particularly when lockdowns were introduced, all staff were adversely affected. Scholars immediately explored challenges experienced by workers in an effort to find solutions. Studies that focused on women and their challenges during this period, had a general focus on all women leaders. In this paper, we focused specifically on academic departmental heads to understand how their leadership was affected, and more importantly, how they coped. We believe that shedding light on the COVID-19 lived-experiences of women academic leaders will enable institutions to understand them and draw on their narratives when planning interventions during crisis periods.

The main question that this paper addressed was: *How did COVID-19 and the resultant lockdowns affect academic women departmental leaders, and what coping mechanisms did they use to deal with their challenges?*

Emanating from this main question, the following secondary questions were interrogated:

- *What challenges did academic women departmental heads face as leaders during COVID-19?*

- *What resources and capacity-building initiatives did women leaders use to cope with the effects of COVID-19 on their leadership?*

- *How did their own capability and agency as leaders pave the way for effective leadership during lockdown?*

3.   Theoretical framework

To attempt to answer the main and secondary questions, Sen's (1999) Capabilities Approach (CA) was adopted. The Capabilities Theory in general looks into how environments enable people's functionings and agency (Sen, 1999). The four important principles advocated in this theory are functionings, capabilities, agency, well-being, and conversion factors which emanate from the belief that human beings only attain a sense of well-being and achievement if they have freedom to be, and to do (Robeyns, Ingrid & Byskov, 2020). This means that the environment should offer enablers as tools that create a conducive environment for people to succeed in becoming, and being (White, Imperial & Pereira, 2016). Such enablers are resources and opportunities in the environment which could be harnessed as a means to an end. What is important though, is not the abundance of enablers, but the practical opportunities they provide to capacitate people to become, and do.

For the purposes of this paper, CA assisted the researchers to gain insight into women leaders' resources for coping. In this case, we explored the personal coping mechanisms that were a source of strength, in addition to the resources that the institutions provided to assist women who are heads of department (HoDs) to enact effective leadership practices during the COVID-19 period. In this regard, CA refers to these personal and environmental resources as enablers or functionings (Sen, 1999) which are opportunities that are available to create a means to achieve what people do, or wish to be. However, while it was important to explore the enablers, we were cognisant of the critical CA aspect of freedoms which signifies that the availability of functionings should be investigated in conjunction with how accessible they are, and how easy it is to fully utilise them. Accordingly, an exploration of functionings (enablers) was extended to include whether the women leaders had the agency and capability (White, Imperiale & Perera, 2016) to successfully utilise the resources at their disposal to combat the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. In emphasising the importance of agency in CA, Buzzelli (2015) reiterates that people should have freedom to choose, and achieve what they value through the use of available resources. This choice is what makes the available resources real opportunities. The assumption we had at the commencement stage of our research after reviewing relevant literature sources, was that institutions provided resources to assist women HoDs to cope with the challenges COVID-19 imposed on leadership roles. However, we needed to establish whether the women had any choice in when, how and why they used the resources to assist in the effective management of the crisis period for themselves and their departments in terms of successful teaching and learning.

4.   Leadership and coping during the crisis

Managing a crisis has never been an easy task for any leader. Leaders are often expected to buffer the effects of the crisis so that subordinates do not feel the full impact of the crisis (Klann, 2003). An emergency crisis can entail any situation requiring unprecedented effort to respond to challenging circumstances and still deliver the required outputs. The energy and commitment needed from leaders during a crisis could be a tremendous test of a leader's strength and resilience (Klann, 2003). As work environments experience crisis periods ranging from operational and policy development to procedural and process management, leaders are generally expected to cushion the devastating effects on employees, sometimes without formal training on the strategic management of crises. This constant transformation and stress in the higher education context could lead to psychological distress that includes anxiety, burnout, and at times depression on the part of the leaders (Hulbert-Williams *et al.,*

2021). Leaders, therefore, require coping mechanisms for crisis management to prevent physical and mental ill-health (Lupe *et al*., 2020; Vinkers *et al*., 2020).

This paper delved into women HoDs in higher education with a view to understanding their challenges and coping strategies during the devastating time of COVID-19, specifically the online working aspect. A particular focus on women leaders was essential when considering women's history as a marginalised group in all spheres of the labour market (Casale & Shepherd, 2021). Scholars (Priola, 2004; Ellemers, 2018) have always emphasised the challenges women in leadership face as they execute their role as leaders, in addition to other multiple roles that they are expected to perform at home and on other fronts. The challenges also occurred during regular face-to-face interactions; therefore, it is critical to establish how women leaders coped in critical crisis periods such as lockdowns. Scholars have already conducted several studies on the effects of COVID-19 on human beings in different work environments; hence, they allude to the crippling effects of mobility restrictions such as quarantine, isolation, and social distancing (Rubin & Wessely, 2020; Talevi *et al*., 2020). Studies by Amaral-Prado *et al*. (2020) and Roy *et al*. (2020) on university staff during COVID-19 found that many suffered from mental health complications that affected their normal work functions. The mental health challenges mainly originated through inadequate preparedness of staff to work via virtual platforms (Babore *et al*., 2020) and their unpreparedness in using technology.

As mentioned earlier, despite the challenges engendered by the pandemic, university leaders and management had the difficult task of continuing with the academic programmes during this traumatic period. They had to stabilise internal and external demands (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016) by adapting their functions to online platforms. Adapting assessment strategies was particularly difficult, requiring extra efforts by ordinary academics to align these to online learning and teaching. When leaders manage this stressful transformation, they guard against staff burnout and low morale. Klann (2003) emphasises that crisis management and leadership are demanding on the leader because it entails managing operations and human responses simultaneously. Managing the workforce (humans) is particularly challenging as people's emotions are involved. Women leaders are even more challenged because they must constantly play a balancing game of sound professional leadership while still attending to household responsibilities. For most women, multitasking has created a confusing and disempowering space. As such, Mangolothi (2021) describes the dire situation of women in higher education who must multitask through their work responsibilities which include nurturing, child-rearing, and home-caring roles during the lockdown. The women are forced to engage adaptive coping behaviours to reduce, tolerate and manage this stressful balancing game (Algorani & Gupta, 2020; Baqutayan, 2015; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Therefore, the question is, what critical-thinking and behaviours were enacted by women departmental heads to cope with, and to continue with daily responsibilities (functionings) in a psychologically-distressed context? While scholars have investigated multiple coping and adaptation strategies that academic leaders applied to cope with the effects of the pandemic, their studies do not focus on women in leadership positions who also had to mitigate pandemic challenges (Almazan *et al.,* 2019; Chirombe *et al*., 2020; Gan, 2020; Seriño & Ratilla, 2021; Verdida *et al*., 2020). It is the contention of the authors of this paper that the voice of women leaders in HoD positions is imperative to create a platform for them to narrate their own experiences, and to offer workable and realistic strategies that might assist them in similar crisis situations.

5. Methods

The phenomenon of coping in a crisis among academic women HoDs was explored through the narrative inquiry qualitative research method (Butina, 2015). This narrative qualitative methodology allowed us to engage women via in-depth discussions (Etikan, 2016) into their lived-experiences of leadership during the COVID-19 period through an interpretive paradigm. Such discussions mostly occurred via the media platform instead of face-to-face interactions. This was due to the fact that, at the time of data collection, lockdown restrictions had just been lifted, and most participants were uncomfortable with contact sessions. Ten (10) academic women leaders from two HEIs in South Africa were selected to participate in individual semi-structured interviews which were aligned to the study's purpose and research questions. Thus, this narrative inquiry was relevant and feasible because the researchers collected extensive information to make-sense of the context of individual women leaders during a pandemic crisis. Additionally, the selection of participants and institutions was conducted through the convenience sampling technique as we ensured that selected participants were available, and that they met the necessary criterion (Etikan, 2016) of holding a HoD position at a HEI during the pandemic peak periods of 2020 and 2021. From both higher education institutional cases, the same email that clearly stipulated the inclusion criteria for the target population, and was approved by the ethical clearance committee beforehand, was sent to participants. In the case of the one institution, the researcher used the central head of department email address, while for the second institution emails were sent through the relevant representative deans on the ethics committee. In both cases, the first five HODs who responded were selected. Table 1 depicts the demographic information of the selected women HoD participants.

Table 1:   Demographics and summary of women academic leader profiles

Woman academic code	Institution	Age	Years of experience in HoD position
HOD1	HEI1	42	2
HOD2	HEI1	63	2
HOD3	HEI1	34	3
HOD4	HEI1	58	8
HOD5	HEI1	60	1 year & 6 months
HOD6	HEI2	43	2
HOD7	HEI2	51	4
HOD8	HEI2	52	2
HOD9	HEI2	51	5 months
HOD10	HEI2	65	2

The demographic data showed a greater participation of women leaders aged between 34 and 65 years who occupied academic leadership positions during the last five months to eight years.

6. Data analysis, interpretation, and discussion

The aim of this study was to understand and share the challenges experienced by ten university women academic leaders (i.e. two case studies which are referred to as HEI1 and HEI2) during COVID-19. This pandemic resulted in an abrupt change in the HEIs' routine which caused strenuous demands; for example, technological resources that had never been used much before for leading, teaching, learning and administrative activities, were now compulsory for

remote work. Thus, throughout this pandemic the higher education environment, leaders, staff, and students were exposed to psychological and physical pressures which required resilience and coping strategies to deliver astute management and leadership. The findings of this research confirmed that the duties of all women academic leaders' astronomically increased to include additional tasks related to online teaching and learning management. Therefore, these women academic leaders indicated that it was critical to alleviate the negative effects of their stress for a healthier, more productive, collective future for higher education. This was evident when participants shared that healthy eating, sleeping, resting, and exercise habits remain essential for operative leadership (HOD5/HEI1; HOD9,10/HEI2). In terms of women leaders' study programmes, one participant stated that due to high workload demands at university she had to suspend her doctoral studies for a year (HOD1/HEI1).

Concerning the analysis of collected narrative data for this study, thematic analysis was applied by using the Capabilities Concepts as analytical tools based on the psycho-social model approach (Lizano, He & Leake, 2021). This demonstrated a significant connection with other biopsychosocial models in coping studies (Son et al., 2016; Amaral-Prado *et al.,* 2020). The findings revealed that women HoD narrators utilised social, physical, psychological, and spiritual resources (Lizano, He & Leake, 2021) to develop capacity-building skills to cope with their diverse leadership responsibilities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Additionally, the Psycho-social Model approach (Amaral-Prado *et al.,* 2020) aligned with Folkman and Lazarus' (1980, 1988) Inventory of Coping Strategies. Most of the adaptive coping strategies and the dynamics of biopsychosocial factors that these ten university women leaders unitised were either problem-focused or emotion-focused approaches. These two approaches are consistent with Algorani and Gupta's (2020) assertions mentioned in a comparable study on coping strategies in the United States. Moreover, the coping strategies that women academic leaders displayed were mostly linked to Sen's (1999) Capability Model. In line with this model, the findings are discussed below in congruence to the concepts of functionings, freedoms, agency, and institutional structures that might support or hamper the coping abilities of women leaders, especially during times of crises. Within the coping strategies discussion in the sections below, challenges that women leaders in HEIs faced, are highlighted. We therefore did not include a section specifically dedicated to challenges as we believed that these are intertwined with the coping mechanisms.

6.1 Social resources utilised by women academic leaders to cope with the effects of COVID-19 on their leadership

This study ascertained that adaptive coping strategies of women leaders during the pandemic predominantly aligned with proactive cognitive and behavioural dispositions. This resulted in snowballing two coping strategies (which will jointly be discussed for that reason), namely:

* *Confrontative coping* refers to attempts to aggressively confront a stressful crisis to change the situation. Women academic leaders shared their experiences:
  (HoD6/HEI2): *I directly confront my line manager or colleagues.*
  (HoD10/HEI2): *The dean became my greatest support.*
  (HoD1/HEI2): *I focused on getting things to work.*
  (HOD1,5/HEI1): *But you must act quickly.*
  (HOD9/HEI2): *There is the need to be assertive during crisis periods.*
  (HOD4/HEI1; HOD9,10/HEI2): *I had to put my foot down and* [say no] … *this is the policy that we all have to follow; and confronting the line managers also ensured that we could address a negative working environment.*
  (HOD5/HEI1): *I am getting into a toxic space, so the one thing now is I'm ready to fight.*

- *Seeking social support* refers to efforts to find information, including emotional and instrumental support. This strategy which links to the *confrontative* one (above) is applied to enhance the confrontative mechanisms used by the HODs. The support that the HODs referred to included friends and colleagues (HoD1), the IT department, secretaries, and other support departments and family (HoD5). The HoDs reported that without these fundamental support systems, their leadership during the pandemic would have been unsuccessful. Thus, most of the narrative reflections (HOD1,4,5/HESI1; HOD6,9,10/HEI2) on the effects of COVID-19 on women academic leadership practices confirmed that confrontation and seeking support as cognitive and behavioural tactics, were the valued functionings for these participants. Also, the academic women leaders chose to grasp opportunities such as reaching out to line managers or colleagues (social support), and other relevant departments to assist and minimise the debilitating effects of the pandemic. In other words, the women HoDs themselves were instrumental in increasing their own functioning by using the social institutional resources to increase their agency.

6.2 Physical resources utilised by women academic leaders to cope with the effects of COVID-19 on their leadership

The results of this study indicated that management in the two institutions ensured that curriculum delivery functionings within higher education became a priority. The majority of the women academic leaders' narratives disclosed the provision of physical institutional resources that included a range of capacity-building programmes, administrative support, and digital technology provision that were meant to facilitate the smooth transition to virtual platforms. This is consistent with other studies that report on the initiatives by HEIs in their endeavours to provide support to all employees to mitigate stress levels (White, Imperiale & Perera, 2016; Nash & Churchill, 2020).

In the first institution (i.e. HEI1) in particular, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor organised a series of leadership seminars that focused specifically on capacitating HODs during COVID-19. While these were not tailor-made for women leaders, its importance for all HODs' capacitation was applauded by some of the participants from this institution. However, some HoDs felt that this initiative was misplaced because it shifted the accountability burden from top management to the HoDs. One HoD from this institution expressed the following sentiments:

> *For me, it was an insulting response to a crisis amongst HODs to take the people that are the most functional, the most capable, who are holding things together by a thread, and tell them that they're the ones who need leadership training* (HoD3)

This excerpt is a clear example of how the concepts of functionings and freedoms could be misaligned. The HoD3/HEI1 in this instance, felt that this initiative was not increasing her agency to function better, but was a demeaning exercise. This highlights the importance of following a consultative process in assisting leadership during times of crisis. It is, however, worth acknowledging that institutional interventions assisted the women leaders to cope better. The HoDs' functioning was also strengthened through regulated access control overseen by them, in addition to them providing guidelines to others to follow a clear direction to transition during lockdown.

While focusing on the available resources might present a picture of smooth-running institutions during pandemic lockdowns, a look at the challenges that the women academic leaders mentioned indicated that women leaders still lacked the freedoms and agency to lead effectively during this period. The multiple roles of women as workers and home-caregivers

have always been at the centre of research on women – which now increased to home-office duties during the pandemic. In other words, boundaries between home and work became progressively blurred (Alon *et al.,* 2020; Augustus 2021; Cui, Ding & Zhu*,* 2020; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). Women academic leaders were not only confronted with the home being an unsuitable environment for formal work duties, but also to enact the balancing of diverse roles during their daily functioning. One HoD lamented:

> *Nobody looks at who you are, whether your home is a conducive environment to work in… you are married, you have a husband, you have maybe relatives coming into visit or my friends coming to visit. And here I am occupying this table now and don't want any noise.* (HOD2)

This situation affected their families in a negative way. Families, and not institutions, had to make space to accommodate work-related activities in their family spaces. One of the participants aptly commented on the sacrifice that families had to make:

(HOD2/HEI1): *I am occupying this table now, and don't want any noise.*

On the lack of shared understanding concerning resource provision, Sen (2020) emphasises the importance of freedoms and agency since organisations and institutions provide necessary valued potential functionings such as digital and technology management, including support and access to devices for staff in various departments – all of which contribute to alleviating the stresses of operating during the pandemic. Thus, during the pandemic it was not merely a provision of effective and efficient resource- support, but also interacting proactively and innovatively to convert these online digital resources (e.g. through weekly research broadcasts) into opportunities for research support and output achievements (HOD7/HEI2). Another HOD (HOD8/HEI2) stated it was beneficial to enhance one's own technological skills and expertise to build a supporting learning community within a department.

6.2.1 Focusing on problem-solving and managing technology

From this study, it emerged that women academic leaders are active problem-solvers who adopt analytical approaches to initiate change to lessen the effects of a stressful situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. They applied techniques such as 'prioritising written tasks' (HOD2/HEI1; HOD8/HEI2), conducting 'strategic planning meetings' (HOD3/HEI1) or diffusing a conflict management situation 'by acting as a safety net for staff' (HOD9/HEI2). Another (HOD8/HEI2) indicated that the success of problem-solving is related to a leader's 'work ethics' which 'determines how you are going to cope, perceive stress and solve problems' related to the online work environment.

Other women leaders stated that to have *'competent members in your team'* (HOD3/HEI1) and being *'flexible'* and *'my way is not the only way'* (HOD8/HEI2) assisted in enacting problem-focused coping strategies which are essential to decrease the intensity of stress during a crisis. This stressful situation is especially due to the increased complexities at universities that necessitate prompt solutions, such as finding strategies to limit the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational programmes. Al-Dabbagh (2020:2) emphasises that "making innovative decisions and responding to needs within the limits of time, uncertainty, the lack of information, and high level of stress", intensified the difficulty of the decision-making process for leaders during COVID-19. It was significant that women academic leaders demonstrated that they improved their professional development in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis through *'creative research broadcasts'* (HOD9/HEI2), *'paying attention to*

detail and correcting your own mistakes' (HOD9/HEI2), and adjusting to the crisis through decentralised decision-making processes (Al-Dabbagh, 2020; Augustus 2021).

In this study, it was evident that during the traumatic COVID-19 pandemic, women academic leaders not only fulfilled an essential role so that their universities became functional, but also displayed distinct leadership competencies. Similar studies advocated crucial leadership competencies to circumvent the challenges associated with the pandemic; namely flexibility, accounting for emotions, attention to others' opinions, engagement, sense-making, being a technology enhancer, possessing emotional stability, and emphasising employee well-being (Dirani *et al.,* 2020; Schwantes, 2020). Aligned to the range of leadership competencies, academic leadership normally comprises of diverse management roles such as strategic management, administrative roles, transformational agendas, and visionary planning (Settles *et al.,* 2019). The women leaders in this case demonstrated these competencies to serve as safety nets for their departments while creating a flourishing and functional online working environment. However, using online spaces presented its own challenges that affected the freedoms and agency of women HoDs to effectively and efficiently utilise valuable resources provided by the institution. The women mentioned barriers such as loadshedding, increased workloads (HOD9,10/HEI2), limited time for research (HOD8,9,10/HEI2), as well as being physically and emotionally exhausted (HOD9,10/HEI2).

In some cases, the resources did not offer sufficient relief from the exhaustion of leading during COVID-19, as adequate rest and sleep (HOD5/HEI1; HOD9,10/HEI2), and good eating habits (HOD10/HEI2) to release tension were difficult to attain. The value of teamwork (HOD3/HEI1; HOD9/HEI2) and a sense of community (HOD10/HEI2) were also perceived as powerful resources for effective decision implementation (Kohtamäki, 2019; & Zafar *et al.*, 2019). In this study women leaders were plagued by regular uncertainties and inconsistencies, which were only possible to eradicate by exhibiting trust (HOD7,8,9,10/HEI2), honesty, and ensuring that systems are implemented to promote psychological safety (HOD7/HEI2) as recommended by Samoilovich (2020).

6.3 Psychological/Spiritual resources applied by women academic leaders to cope with the effects of COVID-19 on their leadership

6.3.1   Distancing and escape-avoidance

It was evident that only one woman academic leader did not utilise cognitive efforts to decrease the effects of the stressful COVID-19 pandemic situation. This was illustrated when the narrator stated: *'I'm better off in a lecturer position because then at least I can protest ... being a lecturer ...researcher'* (HOD3/HEI1). This confirmed that she did not display resilience to lessen the effects of the challenges during the pandemic. Others who lacked resilience to cope with the stresses of the pandemic at an HEI recently resigned, citing burnout as a cause (Clark *et al.*, 2020). Although this study demonstrated that these two Higher Education cases have taken steps to support employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, including initiating remote working arrangements (Nash & Churchill, 2020), it appeared that flexible working arrangements were not consistently applied. Despite these 'flexibility freedoms' regarding their functioning, some women leaders felt that they should not micro-manage from home (HOD7,9,10/HEI2), but rather *'create an innovative environment where staff can flourish and be appreciated'* (HOD7/HEI2).

6.3.2 *Self-control, accepting responsibilities, positive appraisal, and connectedness*

Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to adapt and migrate towards online platforms. In this study women academic leaders' efforts to control their actions and emotions, also known as "internal locus of control" (Kniffin *et al*., 2020; Rotter, 1954; Rotter, 1966) assisted them when confronted with *'a chaotic job'* (HOD3/HEI1). To exacerbate the situation, additional administrative responsibilities which were unavoidable (HOD10/HEI2) during the pandemic, overburdened the women HoDs. For example, monitoring campus access was not only a tedious administrative task, but also emotionally stressful. However, these women leaders gallantly fulfilled their contribution in addressing the related problems concerning the pandemic by accepting increased responsibilities, even if this meant an increased workload. One HoD confirmed that despite the increased workload, she could cope because of the assistance of a supportive dean, and by belonging to a small department (HOD10/HEI2). Additionally, these women leaders could perform with inner strength and courage due to online professional development opportunities; one-woman leader articulated *'If I know how it is done* [capabilities], *it is easier to lead others'* (HOD6/HEI2). Additionally, self-appraisal is motivational: *'Thank you for being honest'* (HOD6/HEI2), *'balancing verbal presence via your voice'* (HOD8/HEI2), and '*students have often said to me… we appreciate … you are honest about your experiences and your mental health … it makes us feel … if you struggle … can also be successful* (HOD3/HEI1). These motivational articulations are enriching for women leaders to feel self-connected, and to strengthen their relationships with other academics and students. These women leaders balance the problem-focused with the emotional-focused coping strategies that facilitate engagement and shared decision-making. Dumulesco and Mutiu (2021) emphasise that a shared leadership paradigm assists higher education institutions to react to a crisis through distributed leadership and an increase in responsibility at any organisational level (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Besides, distributed leadership implies creating connections among all higher education staff members at all levels to confront a crisis and facilitate meaningful transformation in the future. Women leaders' balancing act between problem-focus and emotion-focus coping strategies ensures psychological safety in the department.

7. Conclusion

Global pandemics such as COVID-19 have forced many to re-think how they function, use their homes and offices, and appreciate their freedom. Additionally, the higher education environment becomes progressively more complex as our society evolves through technology to allow unlimited connections and possibilities. In this study, identifying coping structures was necessary to understand how stress related to COVID-19 affects human health, functioning, and the freedom and psyche of academic women departmental leaders. Thus, this case study analysis makes a significant contribution to contemporary literature and research on the challenges of women's academic leadership during crisis situations. Additionally, this research innovatively used an non-controversial gender lens on COVID-19-related research with women academic leaders taking centre stage. These academic women leaders' narratives confirmed that balancing their problem-coping and emotional-coping competencies defined a space for merging coping categories in response to psychological stress – usually triggered by abrupt changes. Life stressors such as the pandemic require coping strategies that are the behaviours, thoughts, and emotions that one activates to adjust to the changes that occur in one's life to create a flourishing working environment. Women academic leadership practices may vary across higher education institutions according to their differing organisational

culture, tradition, and mission. Lastly, this study's limitations were related to the small number of participants due the fact that the purposive sample was based on voluntary participation; therefore, future studies should address this phenomenon by including larger samples.

References

Al-Dabbagh, Z. S. 2020. The role of decision-maker in crisis management: a qualitative study using Grounded Theory (COVID-19 pandemic crisis as a model). *Journal of Public Affairs*, 20: e2186. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2186

Algorani, E.B. & Gupta, V. 2020. Coping mechanisms. In *StatPearls [Internet]*. StatPearls Publishing. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559031/

Alon, T., Doepke, M., Olmstead-Rumsey, J. & Tertilt, M. 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality. Available at https://ideas.repec.org/p/bon/boncrc/crctr224_2020_163.html. https://doi.org/10.3386/w26947

Almazan, J.U., Cruz, J.P., Alamri, M.S., Albougami, A.S.B., Alotaibi, J.S.M. & Santos, A.M. 2019. Coping strategies of older adults survivors following a disaster: Disaster-related resilience to climate change adaptation. *Ageing International*, 44(2): 141-153. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-018-9330-1

Amaral-Prado, H.M., Borghi, F., Mellot, M.V.F. & Grassi-Kassisse, D.M. 2020. The impact of confinement in the psychosocial behaviour due COVID-19 among members of a Brazilian university. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 67(6): 720-727. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020971318

Augustus, J. 2021. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Working in Higher Education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (Article 648365): 1-4. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.648365

Babore, L., Lombardi, L., Viceconti, M.L., Pignataro, S., Marino, V., Crudele, M., Candelori, C., Bramanti, S.M. & Trumello, C. 2020. Psychological effects of the COVID-2019 pandemic: Perceived stress and coping strategies among healthcare professionals. *Psychiatry Research*, 293(113366). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113366

Baqutayan, S.M. 2015. Stress and coping mechanisms: A historical overview. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(2): 479-488. https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n2s1p479

Bhagat, S. & Kim, D. 2020. Higher education amidst COVID-19: Challenges and silver lining. *Information System Management*, 37(4): 366-371. https://doi.org/10.1080/10580530.2020.1824040

Burg, M. M., Schwartz, J.E., Kronish, I.M., Diaz, K.M., Alcantara, C., Duer-Hefele, J. & Davidson, K.W. 2017. Does stress result in you exercising less? Or does exercising result in you being less stressed? Or is it both? Testing the bi-directional stress-exercise association at the group and person (N of 1) level. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine,* 51(6): 799-809. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-017-9902-4

Butina, M. 2015. A narrative approach to qualitative inquiry. *Clinical laboratory science,* 28(3): 190-196. https://doi.org/10.29074/ascls.28.3.190

Buzzelli, C. 2015. The capabilities approach: rethinking agency, freedom, and capital in early education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 16(3): 203-213. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949115600030

Casale, D. & Shepherd, D. 2021. *Gendered employment dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from four waves of a South African longitudinal survey*. South Africa: NiDS & CRAM.

Chirombe, T., Benza, S., Munetsi, E. & Zirima, H. 2020. Coping mechanisms adopted by people during the COVID-19 lockdown in Zimbabwe [Special Issue]. *Business Excellence and Management*, 10(1): 33-45. https://doi.org/10.24818/beman/2020.S.I.1-03

Clark, S., McGrane, A., Boyle, N., Joksimovic, N., Burke, L. & Rock, N. 2020. You're a Teacher, You're a Mother, You're a Worker': Gender Inequality during Covid-19 in Ireland. *Gender Work Organisation*, 28 (S1): 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12611

Connolly, M. & Gregory, M. 2008. The Part-time Pay Penalty: Earnings Trajectories of British Women. *Oxford Economic Pap*er, 61(1): i76-i97. https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpn043

Cui, R., Ding, H. & Zhu, F. 2020. Gender Inequality in Research Productivity during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Available at https://arxiv.org/abs/2006. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3623492

Dirani, K.M., Abadi, M., Alizadeh, A., Barhate, B., Garza, R.C. & Gunasekara, N. 2020. Leadership competencies and the essential role of human resource development in times of crisis: a response to Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development International,* 23: 380-394. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1780078

Dumulescu, D. & Mutiu, A. I. 2021. Academic Leadership in the Time of COVID-19: Experiences and Perspectives. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12 (Article 648344): 1-9. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.648344

Ellemers, N. 2018. Gender Stereotypes. *Annual Review of Psychology,* 8(69): 275-298. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011719

Etikan, E. 2016. Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics,* 5(1): 1-4. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11

Folkman, S. & Lazarus, R.S. 1980. An analysis of coping in middle-aged community sample. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 21: 219-239. https://doi.org/10.2307/2136617

Folkman, S. & Lazarus, R.S. 1988. *Manual for the ways of coping questionnaire*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press. https://doi.org/10.1037/t06501-000

Gan, N. 2020. *How Wuhan residents are trying to make the best of the coronavirus lockdown*. CNN. Available at https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/29/asia/coronavirus-wuhan-life-intl-hnk/index.html

Giandhari, J., Pillaya, S., Wilkinsona, E., Tegally, H., Sinayskiyb, I. … & De Oliveira, T. 2020. Early transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in South Africa: An epidemiological and phylogenetic report. *International Journal for Infectious Diseases*, 103: 234-241. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijid.2020.11.128

Hayat, A., Keshavarzi, H. & Zare, S. 2021. Challenges and opportunities from the COVID-19 pandemic in medical education: a qualitative study. *BMC Medical Education*, 21(247): 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-021-02682-z

Hulbert-Williams, N.J., Hulbert-Williams, M.L.L., Smith, E., Howells, L. & Pinato, D.J. 2021. *Evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on supportive care needs, psychological distress and*

quality of life in UK cancer survivors and their support network. https://doi.org/10.1111/ecc.13442

International Labor Organisation (ILG). 2020. Employment Policy Department Newsletter, July/August 2020. Available at https://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/newsletters/WCMS_753573/lang--en/index.htm

International Labor Office (ILO) 2021. *Skills development in the time of COVID-19: Taking stock of the initial responses in technical and vocational education and training.* Geneva: ILO Press.

Jakovljevic, M., Bjedov, S., Jaksic, N. & Jakovljevic, I. 2020. COVID-19 pandemic and public and global mental health from the perspective of global health security. *Psychiatria Danubina*, 32(1): 6-14. https://doi.org/10.24869/psyd.2020.6

Kawamura, K.M. 2013. Understanding the concept of care in cross-cultural settings: Toward a resource definition of care in work organizations. *Cross Cultural Management*, 20(2): 100-123. https://doi.org/10.1108/13527601311313373

Kermott, C.A., Johnson, R.E. Sood, R., Jenkins, S.M. & Sood, A. 2019. Is higher resilience predictive of lower stress and better mental health among corporate executives? *PLoS One*, 14(6): e0218092. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0218092

Kezar, A., Fries-Britt, S., Kurban, E., McGuire, D. & Wheaton, M.M. 2018. *Speaking Truth and Acting with Integrity: Confronting Challenges of Campus Racial Climat*e. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Kezar, A. J. & Holcombe, E.M. 2017. *Shared Leadership in Higher Education*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_537-1

Kivunja, C. & Kuyini, A.B. 2017. Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5): 26-41. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n5p26

Klann, G. 2003. *Crisis Leadership: Using Military Lessons, Organizational Experiences, and the Power of Influence3 to Lessen the Impact of Chaos on the People You Lead*. Greensborro, North Carolina: Centre for Creative Leadership.

Kohtamäki, V. 2019. Academic leadership and university reform-guided management changes in Finland. *Journal Higher Education Policy Management* 41: 70-85. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2018.1553499

Kniffin, K., Narayanan, & J. Anseel, K. 2020. Covid-19 and the workplace: Implications, issues, insights for future research and action (working paper).

Lizano, E., He, S. & Leake, R. 2021. Caring for our child welfare workforce: a holistic framework of worker well-being, human service organizations. *Management, Leadership & Governance*, 45(4): 281-292. https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2021.1932658

Lupe, S.E., Keefer, L. & Szigethy, E. 2020. Gaining resilience and reducing stress in the age of COVID-19. *Current Opinion in Gastroenterology*, 36(4): 295-303. https://doi.org/10.1097/MOG.0000000000000646

Mangolothi, B. 2021. *Gender Transformation in Higher Education – should we be asking new questions?* Available at https://bit.ly/3FJMc87. https://doi.org/10.13169/intecritdivestud.4.2.0061

Mcpherson, S. 2020. COVID-19 has made remote working the new normal - why this might be good for productivity. Available at https://www.gsb.uct.ac.za/ideas-exchange/covid-19/fo-remote-working-could-soon-be-the-new-normal

Mertens, D.M. 2017. Transformative research: personal and societal. *International Journal for Transformative Research*, 4(1): 18-24. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijtr-2017-0001

Nash, M. & Churchill, B. 2020. Caring during COVID-19: A Gendered Analysis of Australian University Responses to Managing Remote Working and Caring Responsibilities. *Gender Work Organisation* 27: 833-846. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12484

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). 2020. Strengthening online learning when schools are closed: The role of families and teachers in supporting students during the COVID-19 crisis. Available at https://bit.ly/3heFQEf

Priola, V.C. 2004. Gender and feminine identities – women as managers in a UK academic institution *Women Management Review,* 19(8): 21-40. https://doi.org/10.1108/096494204105754149

Ramohai, J. 2019. A Black woman's perspective on understanding transformation and diversity in South African higher education. *Transformation in Higher Education,* 4(1): 1-10. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v4i0.58

Robeyns, I.D. & Byskov, M.F. 2020. The Capability Approach's Achilles' Heel. In: E. Chiappero-Martinetti, S. Osmani & M. Qizilbash (Eds.). *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 188-205).

Rotter, J.B. 1954. *Social Learning and Clinical Psychology.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Rotter, J.B. 1966. Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychol. Monogr.* 80, 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0092976

Roy, D., Tripathy, S., Kar, S. K., Sharma, N., Verma, S. K. & Kaushal, V. 2020. Study of knowledge, attitude, anxiety & perceived mental healthcare need in Indian population during COVID-19 pandemic. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry,* 51(102083). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102083

Rubin, G.J. & Wessely, S. 2020. The psychological effects of quarantining a city. *BMJ Clinical research in Education,* 36*:* m313. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m313

Samoilovich, D. 2020. Leadership in the time of COVID-19: reflection Latin American higher education leaders. *International Higher Education*, 102: 32-34.

Schwantes, M. 2020. 4 Signs to Instantly Identify a Great Leader during Crisis. Available at https://www.inc.com/marcel-schwantes/great-leader-time-of-crisis.html

Sen, A.K. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seriño, M.N. & Ratilla, T.C. 2021. Local Response and Coping Mechanisms Adopted to Disruptions Associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic at a Filipino State University. *Human Behavior, Development and Society*, 22(1): 41-53.

Settles, I.H., Brassel, S.T., Soranno, P.A.; Cheruvelil, K.S.; Montgomery M. & Elliott, K.C. 2019. Team climate mediates the effect of diversity on environmental science team satisfaction and data sharing. *PLoS One,* 14: e0219196. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0219196

Sherpered, S. 2017. Why are there so few female leaders in higher education: a case of structure and agency? *Management in Education*, 31(2): 82-87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020617696631

Skinner, E.A. & Zimmer-Gembeck, M. 2016. Coping. In *Encyclopedia of Mental Health* 2nd Edition. (pp. 350–357). Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-397045-9.00036-7

Smith, D. E. 1987. *The everyday world as problematic*. Boston: North Eastern University.

Son, H., Friedmann, E., Thomas, S. & Son, Y. 2016. Bio-psychosocial predictors of coping strategies of patients post-myocardial infarction. *International Journal of Nursing Practice,* 22(5): 493-502. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijn.12465

Talevi, D., Socci, V., Carai, M., Carnaghi, G., Faleri, S. … & Pacitti, F. 2020. Mental health outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Rivista di Psichiatria*, 55(3): 137-144.

Verdida, C.C., Galenzoga, V.A.E., Ratilla, T.C., Mazo, M.P., Saz, E.B. & Capuno, O.B. 2020. Coping mechanisms and determinants of perceived status of men and women farmer beneficiaries of the Yolanda Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Program (YRRP) in Region VIII. *Review of Socio-Economic Research and Development Studies,* 4(1): 33-50.

Vinkers, C.H., Van Amelsvoort, T., Bisson, J.I., Branchi, I., Cryan, J.F. … & Van der Wee, N.J.A. 2020. Stress resilience during the coronavirus pandemic. *European Journal of the European College of Neuropsychopharmacology*, 35: 12-16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroneuro.2020.05.003

Wheatley, D. 2013. Location, Vocation, Location? Spatial Entrapment among Women in Dual Career Households. G*ender Work Organisation*, 20 (6): 720-736. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12005

White, R.G., Imperiale, M.G. & Perera, E. 2016. The Capabilities Approach: Fostering contexts for enhancing mental health and wellbeing across the globe. *Globalisation and Health*, 12(16):1-10. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-016-0150-3

Yildirim, T. M. & Eslen-Ziya, H. 2020. The Differential Impact of COVID-19 on the Work Conditions of Women and Men Academics during the Lockdown. *Gender Work Organisation*, 28 (S1): 691-697. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12529

Zafar, S. M. T., Hmedat, W., Chaubey, D. S. & Rehman, A. 2019. An exploration of academic leadership dynamics: a literature review. *International Journal Leadership,* 7: 35-43.

Zulu, P. S. & Parumasur, S. B.. 2009. Employee perceptions of the management of cultural diversity and workplace transformation. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology,* 35(1): 49-57. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v35i1.426