Adelaide Women
Identifying and fast tracking high potential women
Table of Contents

Project Team .................................................................................................................................................. 3
Executive Summary ......................................................................................................................................... 4
1. Background and Main Objectives .................................................................................................................. 6
   1.1. Main objectives ...................................................................................................................................... 7
2. Project Implementation ................................................................................................................................... 7
   2.1. Interviews with senior management ...................................................................................................... 7
3. Findings ......................................................................................................................................................... 8
   3.1. Best practice approaches to identifying high potential leaders .......................................................... 8
   3.2. Interview results .................................................................................................................................... 9
   3.3. Attributes of high potential leaders ....................................................................................................... 9
   3.4. Identification of high potential leaders .................................................................................................. 10
   3.5. Fast tracking potential leaders ............................................................................................................. 11
   3.6. Barriers/concerns .................................................................................................................................. 11
4. Recommendations ......................................................................................................................................... 12
   4.1. Short-term options ................................................................................................................................. 12
   4.2. Medium-term options ............................................................................................................................ 12
   4.3. Long-term options ................................................................................................................................ 13
5. Deliverables ................................................................................................................................................... 13
   5.1. Expected benefits .................................................................................................................................. 13
6. Organisational Impact .................................................................................................................................. 13
   6.1. Risks ....................................................................................................................................................... 13
7. References .................................................................................................................................................... 14
8. Appendix ...................................................................................................................................................... 15
   8.1. Appendix 1: Interview schedule for senior University staff .......................................................... 16
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Executive Summary

The University's strategic and operational plan, the Beacon of Enlightenment, has a target of achieving 30% of senior academic and professional contracts being held by women by the end of 2015. This issue has become important because women currently only represent 27.5% of senior positions within the University, which is well below other GO8 universities. In order to achieve this target the University requires clear strategies.

*Project Fast Track* proposes a new strategy for reaching and sustaining a higher proportion of women in senior positions – which is improving the identification of high potential women within the University and fast tracking them into leadership opportunities.

Firstly, a literature review was undertaken to determine (a) what processes have been used to identify high potential leaders in 'best-practice organisations' and (b) what processes are most suited to a University environment. Secondly, interviews were conducted with 23 senior staff from within the University (Executive Deans, Senior Managers and Heads of Schools) in order to determine (a) the processes that they currently use to identify high potential leaders and (b) their ideas for fast tracking high potential female leaders.

The key findings of *Project Fast Track* are:

- Organisations use a variety of processes to identify high potential leaders, and include clear and measureable criteria to facilitate the process.
- The critical attributes of high potential leaders include strategic thinking and action; personal drive and integrity; and effective communication and team work.
- Senior leaders emphasised the importance of ‘knowing their staff and their aspirations’ and providing them with opportunities to demonstrate their leadership capabilities.
- Potential leaders should be identified on merit within a context that is fair, equitable and encourages diversity in leadership styles.
- Opportunities to develop and demonstrate leadership capabilities should be provided via: secondements; acting or deputy positions; project-based activities; and high-level university committees or other strategic tasks. A ‘talent pool’ of potential leaders should be established.
- Senior leaders identified a number of issues that may undermine the effectiveness of any strategies that are implemented if not addressed. These include: inconsistency in the uptake of PDR processes across the University; excessive reliance on line managers to identify potential leaders; the continued dominance of a ‘masculine-style’ of leadership within the University; and workload issues.

Recommendations

Specifically this project recommends that the University of Adelaide:

*Identification*

- Integrates the seven leadership capabilities into the day-to-day work and language of managers and staff in order to ensure that these capabilities live outside of the training room and that a shared understanding of desirable traits and behaviours is established.
• Broadens the PDR process to include leadership capabilities and aspirations as a first step toward identifying high potential female talent.

• Trains line managers to identify leadership capabilities.

**Fast tracking**

• Establishes defined pathways and succession planning through high-level University secondments, committee positions, deputy/acting/associate roles and/or special projects.

• Establishes a database of high potential leaders who are available for these opportunities, at both a Faculty and University level.

• Provides discretionary budgets in Schools to buy-out teaching time for high potential women to enable them to participate in leadership opportunities.

• Expands the existing leadership programs to include support for transitioning high high potential females into senior leadership positions (e.g. mentoring, coaching and shadowing).

**Culture**

• Develops and fosters a culture that values equally the qualities and contributions of male and female staff and, in doing so, recognises, employs, and promotes talented women.
1. Background and Main Objectives

The Beacon of Enlightenment and supporting Operational Plan 2013-15, together with the Vice-Chancellor’s equity objectives for 2013-15, has a stated goal to address gender equity and, in particular, the under-representation of women in senior management positions at the University of Adelaide (senior management defined as academic staff in the roles of Deputy Vice Chancellor, Vice President, Pro Vice Chancellor, Executive Dean and Head of School, and professional staff on senior contracts).

The representation of women throughout the University is uneven. As of March 2012, 66% of the professional staff, and 38% of the academics, were female. However, the percentage of females employed in senior positions within the University is much lower, averaging only 27.5% (34.3% of professional staff and 21.4% of academics).

One cost of this gender inequity is that the University lost its accreditation as an ‘Employer of Choice for Women’ (EOCFW) in 2009. Education and training organisations that hold EOCFW status currently employ an average of 50% women in senior management roles.1 Currently, four of the Group of Eight universities hold EOCFW status – namely, the Universities of Melbourne, New South Wales, Sydney, and Western Australia.1 Within South Australia, Flinders University and the University of South Australia both have EOCFW status.

The literature identifies a number of organisational benefits associated with the representation of women in leadership positions.2 More specifically, it can provide a competitive advantage through improved business decisions and improved financial performance.3–6 Women tend to have a transformational leadership style7 and be more inclusive and communicative, which has been found to be associated with greater organisational effectiveness. However, there are a number of barriers to women taking on leadership positions in both academic and other organisations. Some of these include: the culture of an organisation, which defines perceptions of leadership and the pathways to leadership; work-life interactions, where the caring role of women can impact on their leadership progression; and workplace dynamics that make it more difficult for women to build strategic relationships, create opportunities and utilise networks.2

There are a number of options that organisations can consider when seeking to address these barriers and support women with their progression into leadership positions. The first key step is to identify women who have the skills, ability and desire to take on leadership positions within the organisation. The accurate identification of potential leaders is a complex, multifaceted and challenging task,8 and it is important to be able to distinguish between high-performing staff and high-potential staff.9 High-performers consistently perform well in their own area of expertise and exceed expectations, but may not wish to progress into leadership positions within the organisation. High-potential staff have the ability, organisational commitment and motivation to rise and succeed in more senior positions. High performance does not equate to high potential, and research indicates that 70% of top performers lack the critical attributes essential for leadership roles.10

Given this context, Project Fast Track focused on responding to the University’s target of having 30% of senior positions held by women in 2015 by determining options for how high potential women can be identified within the University and how they can be fast tracked to leadership opportunities.
1.1. Main objectives

The two main objectives of the project were:

1. To determine a transparent and effective process for identifying women of high potential who demonstrate a willingness and capacity to progress into senior contracts at the University of Adelaide.

2. To enable the transition and progression of women into senior contracts through proposed initiatives that will complement the established leadership programs.

The project looks specifically at initiatives to support: (1) the identification of high potential women and (2) fast tracking high potential women into leadership opportunities.

The project investigates current and ideal approaches to the identification of high potential women, and considers any enhancements to existing processes and support systems that will be required to improve the rate and ease of transition of women into senior level contracts. This complements existing initiatives aimed at increasing the proportion of women in leadership roles – including the introduction of fellowships designed to assist women whose career progression has been disrupted by carer roles (Barbar Kidman Women's fellowship Scheme, which commenced in 2012), the faculty-based gender strategies that are currently being developed, and the newly established leadership development program for women (Adelaide Women, which commenced in 2013).

2. Project Implementation

A number of steps were undertaken to achieve the project objectives, including:

1. Benchmarking: this involved examining the leadership programs for women and methods of identifying talent that have been used by the GO8 universities and other high-profile commercial organisations.

2. Reviewing best-practice in the literature and identifying ways to improve the process by which high potential talent is identified.

3. Interviewing senior leaders from across the University regarding the attributes of high potential women.

4. Identifying both short- and long-term recommendations and actions for the University.

The project focused specifically on identifying and fast tracking high potential leaders who are currently at Academic Level D or E and Professional Level 10.

2.1. Interviews with senior management

A major part of the project involved interviews with senior managers from across the University. Face-to-face or telephone interviews were held with 23 senior leaders using a structured interview (Appendix 8.1). The interviews focused on: the attributes of leaders; current approaches to identifying high-potential leaders; options for fast-tracking potential female leaders; and strategies that were currently being implemented to meet the University’s strategic goal of achieving 30% female representation in leadership positions by 2015. The interviews were conducted in July and August 2013 by all members of the project team in areas that were outside of their Faculty or Division.
Interviewees were identified from the current list of senior staff and included: Executive Deans, Senior Managers and Heads of Schools. The Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Executive Directors were excluded from this study. There was a total pool of 45 senior staff and, of these, 23 participants (51%) were interviewed (see Table 1). Only seven of those interviewed were female, which was an undesirable but unavoidable consequence of the University’s current senior management profile. This may limit the representativeness and generalisability of the findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management level</th>
<th>Number interviewed</th>
<th>Proportion of females interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Dean</td>
<td>5 (all Executive Deans)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Management Level 3</td>
<td>6 (rep from each Division)</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of Schools</td>
<td>12 (min two from each Faculty)</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Findings

The findings are divided into two areas: (1) a summary of the approaches that are used to identify high potential leaders in ‘best-practice’ organisations and (2) the outcomes of our interviews with senior University staff.

3.1. Best practice approaches to identifying high potential leaders

A key step for organisations in identifying high potential leaders is to determine the qualities and attributes that they seek in their leaders, which can then be used to determine which employees possess these attributes. In the literature, the most common attributes that organisations used when identifying high potential talent were that the person:

- consistently and significantly outperformed their peers in a variety of settings and circumstances,\(^\text{11}\)
- reflects the culture and value of their organisation,\(^\text{11,12}\)
- has the potential to be a role-model and teacher,\(^\text{11,12}\) and
- has the ability to succeed in a higher role in the future and has the potential to handle responsibility of greater scale (i.e. larger budgets, more staff) and scope (ie more complexity) than their current position.\(^\text{12,13}\)

It is essential that organisations are able to define a ‘high potential leader’ by outlining the qualities, characteristics, skills and abilities that individuals need to have to successfully perform in senior leadership positions.\(^\text{14}\) These criteria need to be measureable, through the development of competency frameworks or models that employ behavioural indicators. Tools are then developed to measure high potential criteria.

One review of leadership potential by Dries and Peppermans\(^\text{9}\) described 77 criteria that were used by organisations around the world to identify leadership potential. Based on these criteria, they developed a model of leadership potential, which had four quadrants – analytical skills (e.g.
intellectual curiosity, decision-making and problem-solving), learning agility (e.g. willingness to learn, emotional intelligence), drive (e.g. orientation and perseverance) and emergent leadership (e.g. motivation to lead and stakeholder sensitivity). In addition, they suggested measures that could be used to assess an employee on key indicators for each of these quadrants.

Another approach that has been used by a range of organisations, including the Australian Public Sector Service Commission, was developed by the Corporate Leadership Council\textsuperscript{15} in the USA and Lombardo and Eichinger\textsuperscript{16}. Their approach includes three elements for identifying high potential leaders – ability, aspiration and engagement – which have been used to develop a ‘High potential employee diagnostic’. This diagnostic asks high potential leaders a series of questions that are scored in terms of these three elements.

Other, processes that have been used in the identification of high-potential leaders range from formal and transparent methods – where high potential employees are officially named – through to more informal approaches. In a survey of high potential talent in the USA, the majority of respondents reported that they were identified through a formal process.\textsuperscript{12} The most common processes used for identifying and assessing high potential employees are\textsuperscript{14}:

- Manager appraisal: which is characterised by line managers identifying staff with potential and is often based on their independent judgement and individual criteria for leadership.
- Decision-maker consensus: which is characterised by decision-makers (senior staff) meeting as a group to discuss the suitability of candidates. Some leadership criteria may be used in this process.
- Criteria-based approach: which is characterised by having clear and articulated criteria on which to base decisions about leadership potential and by which to assess staff performance. The use of multi-rater feedback is one example of this approach.

Each of these approaches has its own limitations. For example, managers may not have the skills to make such assessments; the criteria by which employees are assessed may not be clear; and many of the criteria are difficult to measure reliably.

3.2. Interview results

The key findings from the interviews are summarised below with full response analysis available upon request.

3.3. Attributes of high potential leaders

When asked to articulate the key attributes of high potential leaders, senior managers identified a number of qualities, most of which broadly aligned with the University’s ‘Leading at Adelaide’ seven critical leadership capabilities. The most commonly cited attributes were:

- strategic thinking and action, as demonstrated by:
  - a broad university-based and long-term perspective;
  - the ability to identify and articulate important issues and to foresee consequences;
  - an innovative approach that is responsive to emerging needs and trends;
  - the ability to view things from alternative perspectives; and
  - an approach that shows initiative and builds opportunities.
personal drive and integrity, as demonstrated by:

- an enthusiasm and motivation to take on challenges;
- a willingness to extend his/her role and take on new responsibilities when needed; and
- integrity, commitment, and a strong work-ethic.

effective communication, as evidenced by:

- high-level interpersonal skills;
- an ability to articulate and clearly communicate key issues and priorities; and
- the ability to engage staff in a way that achieves a shared vision.

teamwork:

- assisting staff to work together to optimise the achievements and outcomes of the group, as a whole; and
- being respectful of individual perspectives and negotiating a shared vision.

Other important attributes included professional credibility, resilience, rational and lateral thinking, a high level of self-awareness and good self-management skills.

While these attributes are generally consistent with the University’s ‘Leading at Adelaide’ leadership capabilities, it is noteworthy that the language that was used to describe them was variable, indicating that they are not yet an explicit part of the University’s language, culture or thinking. This may be because these capabilities were developed and articulated within an organisational framework that does not reflect the unique character of the University. Alternatively, it may be that these attributes currently sit separately in a training environment or a professional development context, and have yet to be embedded into the University’s day-to-day work, communication and culture.

3.4. Identification of high potential leaders

A recurrent theme was that line managers needed to ‘know their staff and their aspirations’, while also providing opportunities for all staff to demonstrate and develop their leadership capabilities. Specifically, it was suggested that:

- PDRs could be developed to more explicitly identify and address: leadership capabilities and attributes; activities that demonstrate and develop leadership skills (including a review of previous activities and the identification of opportunities for development); and the leadership goals and aspirations of an individual.

- Line managers, who are well-placed to identify staff, should receive specific training on the identification of desirable leadership skills and be encouraged to target staff who are not currently serving on committees (or contributing to specific projects) but for whom such roles would offer new opportunities to develop and demonstrate leadership skills.

Regardless of the mechanism used to identify potential leaders, there was a general consensus that leaders should be identified on the basis of merit and that gender should not be an issue. However, it was also recognised that merit needs to be determined fairly and equitably, and in a way that genuinely values and encourages a diversity of leadership styles.
3.5. Fast tracking potential leaders

Senior managers were additionally asked to identify ways in which high potential female leaders could be fast tracked. Significant concerns were expressed about the possibility that women would be fast tracked into leadership positions to address the University’s targets (affirmative action), without being perceived by their peers as being appointed on merit, or as worthy or competitive candidates. This could significantly undermine their effectiveness and the long-term benefits of this strategy. Many of the respondents were in favour of staff being fast tracked to ‘opportunities’, rather than to ‘positions’. These strategies were not specific to women and largely focussed on building leadership skills. Four approaches were suggested:

> Secondments, acting or deputy positions, which would provide opportunities for professional development and exposure to other areas of the University.

> Involvement in projects or roles that fall outside of a person’s normal duties/work environment (e.g. Associate Deans, Committee Chairperson), preferably at a Faculty/Division or University level; again providing opportunities for staff to develop and demonstrate their leadership capabilities.

> Provision of mentoring and coaching when staff are placed in senior positions and after completing the University’s leadership programs, thereby helping to ensure that female staff successfully transition to more senior roles; particularly given the limited number of female role models currently in these positions and the greater scrutiny that such roles frequently attract.

> Development of a ‘talent pool’, which would consist of high potential staff who could be invited by senior management to assist with special projects or to participate in high-level committees. This pool could consist of staff that had completed one of the University’s leadership programs (Leading the Future, Adelaide Women, Academic Leaders program), had recently been promoted, or were identified by another means.

3.6. Barriers/concerns

Senior managers consistently highlighted the opportunities to foster staff who expressed an interest in developing their profile as leaders and/or who demonstrated their aptitude for such roles. However, they also identified a number of issues that may undermine the effectiveness of the identified strategies if not taken into consideration.

For example concerns were expressed that PDRs were not routinely conducted in all areas of the University and that decision-making often occurred behind ‘closed doors’. This raised concerns about equity and transparency. Some respondents also held the view that line managers should not be the only means by which potential leaders are identified because the opinion of a single person may not always be reliable. Therefore, additional processes needed to operate, in parallel, to ensure the integrity of the process.

There were also concerns regarding the equity of some current practices, which were thought to favour a ‘masculine management style’ and the ‘squeaky wheel’, often overlooking quieter yet equally capable staff who were less assertive. Similarly, there were concerns about the ‘male culture’ of the University, which does not adequately accommodate or foster the career aspirations of its female staff. More specifically, it was noted that differences in the competing priorities (e.g. work-life balance, parental/carer responsibilities), and changing work commitments (e.g. F/T to P/T, impacting on research productivity and ability to travel, need for flexible working hours etc.) continue to disadvantage women.
In the case of academic staff, some respondents expressed the view that leaders were often selected on the basis of academic merit, rather than management ability, which did not necessarily favour the best candidate for such roles.

It was also recognised that many of the proposed strategies are not cost-neutral and the failure to adequately resource the initiatives would undermine their effectiveness and potentially further disadvantage female staff. Respondents recognised that participation in leadership training, secondments, special projects or higher duties would need to be recognised in the person’s workload allocation and that appropriate relief be provided (e.g. teaching relief).

In closing, it is important to recognise that 70% of the interviewees were males and, therefore, not ideally placed to comment on the first-hand experiences of women who have leadership aspirations and potential. A broader perspective is essential if we are to understand why the University of Adelaide has fewer women in leadership positions than many other Australian Universities and how best to address this problem in this institution.

4. Recommendations

This project recommends a series of complementary initiatives to assist in identifying high potential academic and professional women within the organisation and fast tracking these women into senior level contracts.

The recommendations resulting from the findings have been categorised into short-term (first 12 months), medium-term (1 to 2 years) and longer-term recommendations in order to highlight the opportunities for quick wins versus initiatives requiring a larger/longer term investment.

4.1. Short-term options

1. The seven leadership capabilities should be simplified and aligned with the terminology used by senior management and within the broader university context;

2. Staff who have participated in leadership programs should be involved in strategic organisational initiatives and activities; and

3. Pathways for succession planning should be established through high-level University secondments, committee positions, deputy and associate roles, and/or special projects in alignment with the skills, experience and potential of the person.

4.2. Medium-term options

4. The current leadership program should be expanded, beyond its current focus on participation in the course, to include medium-term support, such as coaching, mentoring and shadowing;

5. The PDR process should be mandated throughout the University and:
   a. broadened to include articulation of leadership capability and measurement, and leadership aspirations; and
   b. training should be formalised for all senior and line managers in the identification of leadership capabilities.
4.3. **Long-term options**

6. The PDR process and pathways for succession planning should be tracked and evaluated to ensure their success;

7. A clearly articulated culture that values and supports gender equity at all levels within the University needs to be developed. Such a culture would:
   
   a. Recognise the importance of, and implement processes to ensure, work-life balance;
   
   b. Adjust targets for promotion to include career interruptions and carer responsibilities;
   
   c. Foster leadership skills across all areas of the university; and
   
   d. Incorporate secondments, committee positions, deputy roles and/or special projects into the workloads of all staff.

5. **Deliverables**

5.1. **Expected benefits**

Strong business and financial gains are expected in association with an increase in the representation of women in senior leadership positions:

> Attraction of talented women to the University.
> Retention of talented women within the University.
> Inclusion of women in the executive decision making process.
> Improved business performance through increased diversity at senior levels. Improved bottom-line financial performance.\(^6\)
> A better mix of leadership skills.
> Access to a wider pool of talent.
> Dollar savings on staff recruitment through improved retention, talent management, leadership development and succession planning.
> Improved community perceptions.
> Greater effort across the board and better average performance.

6. **Organisational Impact**

6.1. **Risks**

The parachuting of external candidates into senior leadership roles to meet the 2015 target of 30% women in senior positions could undermine current leadership programs.

There are budget constraints that limit some opportunities for fast tracking women, such as buying-out teaching time for academic staff.

There are few new positions being created within the University and there are only a limited number of senior level positions, so new opportunities are limited by the turnover in these positions.
For academic women, there needs to be consideration of the balance of leadership opportunities and career progression.

The current culture of the University does not promote the importance of gender equity in senior level appointments. The culture is also not well-articulated, making it difficult to identify appropriate leaders who embrace the University’s ideals and who are most likely to succeed in terms of the expected values, behaviours and attitudes.

7. References

8. Silzer R, Church A. The pearls and perils of identifying potential.
8. Appendix
8.1. Appendix 1: Interview schedule for senior University staff

Definitions

*High potential talent* – employee assessed as having the ability, organisational commitment and motivation to rise to and succeed in more senior positions. Strategic thinker. Consistently and significantly outperforms their peer group and a strong capacity to grow and succeed.

*High Performer* – consistently exceeds expectations performs well in their own area of expertise but may not wish to progress in the organisation.

Questions

1. What do you see as the key attributes of a high potential leader/talent?
2. How do you suggest the University identify high potential leaders/talent?
3. How do you currently identify high potential leaders/talent in your area?
   a. What are the pros and cons of the process you use?
   b. How could it be improved?
4. Does the identification of female high potential leaders need to be different in any way?
5. Once the University has identified a pool of potential female leaders who have participated in leadership training programs, how can they be fast tracked into leadership positions?
6. Now that there’s an Operational Plan target of 30% women in senior academic and professional roles by 2015, what strategies are you implementing in your area to address this?