



## Review article

## Women in academic leadership: A chance to shape the future

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the importance of academic leadership within dentistry and its relevance to women. In doing so, it considers the context of women's leadership opportunities, emphasising the importance of women embracing senior roles, highlighting some of the challenges they may face in doing so and suggesting solutions. It is argued that leadership is an essential component of any career in academic dentistry and this is a career with great privilege – not just a job.

## 1. Background

Academic roles in dentistry are no longer the domain of males or dentists, with female clinicians, biomedical scientists, educationalists and other experts contributing to the core activities of dental schools. These include education and training, research and innovation as well as clinical and academic practice, administration and leadership. As co-authors we both hold professorial appointments, having worked our way to this level, and beyond, over time (Fig. 1). Yet we have arrived in these privileged roles by very different journeys, and perhaps rather later in our careers than many male counterparts. Our perspective is of course shaped by our Western European context, although both of us have well established international collaborations, and this undoubtedly provides a broader perspective. The expansion in the number of women internationally working in the dental profession makes this an ideal time to explore the potential of women's contribution in academic institutions. We hope that readers will find some inspiration to take on leadership roles in academic dentistry or inspire others to do so, particularly younger women who want to contribute to shaping the future of the dental profession and gain insight to the process and necessary supports involved in shaping their careers.

## 2. Women in the dental workforce: history and demography

The history of dentistry in western culture is one of innovation, entrepreneurship and meeting population needs, as well as achieving the benefits that go with being a professional. Universities began as places of education for the sons of the middle and upper-classes [1].

Dental schools and hospitals formed as dentistry was being professionalised and universities embraced healthcare education, including dentistry, during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All institutions were historically developed by, and for, men. However, societal change by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century facilitated women to enter universities and over time individuals gained the academic expertise to join the ranks of educators and researchers. Whilst academics have predominantly been male until recent decades, universities are increasingly supportive of academic careers, with men and women playing their part in these developments.

The changing demography of dentistry is important. The number of dentists globally has expanded, and continues to do so, but is inequitably distributed [2]. Whereas traditionally, most students in western countries studying to become dentists have been male, this has changed in recent decades. In many countries females now form the majority of applicants to university in general and entrants to dentistry [3], the demographic impact of which is flowing through into the registrant body [4].

Whilst this growth is encouraging there remain several challenges. First, women have not yet achieved parity in appointment to senior leadership roles. Second, for this to be possible, the leadership pool requires women to be prepared to apply or be nominated for these roles. Third, it is important for women to recognise that in joining a profession there are wider responsibilities to the system and the next generation, as well as personal careers.

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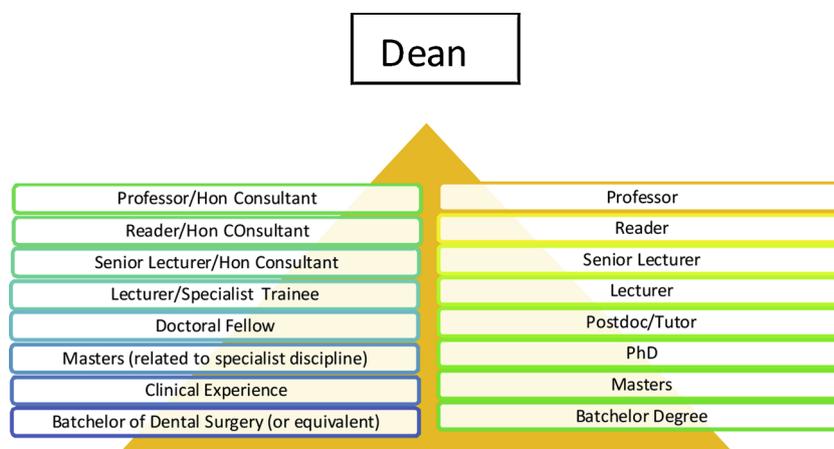


Fig. 1. Schematic of career trajectories in clinical (left) and non-clinical (right) academic dentistry: UK model.

### 3. Emergence of women as leaders in dentistry

There have been strong examples of women holding senior roles and their voice being heard; thus, providing role models for other women. Sociological theory of professions suggests that professions are dynamic and have to keep adapting, as part of their compact with society, to achieve and maintain status in the social and economic order [1,5]. All professions, therefore, require strong leadership to remain relevant to meeting societal needs, and to keep adapting to the demands of government and the public, as well as pushing the boundaries of what they do. Wise leadership is required to take professions forward, particularly as they face change on multiple fronts and the future of professional work is challenged by technology. It is therefore important that women take the opportunities afforded them to contribute to the leadership agenda.

#### 3.1. Theories

There is a plethora of leadership theories and definitions against which to examine women’s emergent leadership roles, but we find the following ideas to be particularly pertinent as they recognise that leadership can occur at different levels in an any organisation or profession.

- Leadership may be considered as the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward *goal setting* and *goal achievement* [6].
- Leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for the *shared aspirations* [7].
- Leadership is an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of *the situation* and the *perceptions* and *expectations* of members...Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group. *Any member* of the group can exhibit some amount of leadership [8].
- Leadership should be *transformative* [9], and reflect contemporary values through a collaborative and shared approach that involves consulting, team decision-making, trusting and empowering team members to act [10].

#### 3.2. Practice

In practice, leadership styles differ, and further ideas in this respect are discussed in the introduction to this series. However, it is worth noting that some leadership styles are more closely associated with women and this includes task-focused or goal-setting and collaborative leadership styles as noted above. Thus, the imperative to improve team

working practice may provide women with an opportunity to be recognised as leaders. Although differences may exist between men and women in their leadership styles overall, individuals will have their preferred styles and should also develop an awareness and understanding of a variety of approaches to help them lead effectively [11].

#### 3.3. Context

At this point, it is important to reflect on the academic context worldwide which is changing rapidly, influenced by neoliberalist philosophies [12], and the major growth or ‘massification’ of higher education [13], whereby more of the world attend university and participate in lifelong education. Universities whether state or private institutions, are run as businesses in our market economies [12]. Quality standards in education and research are essential, with external scrutiny from government and in the case of professions, regulators, such as the General Dental Council in the UK, and the pressure to publish is ever present. Metrics, reflected in league tables, are increasingly important, whether it be research excellence or teaching frameworks and student experience, as they relate to status and funding. Furthermore, universities are increasingly interested in international collaborations through strategic alliances to support education, research and the global competency of staff and students. Thus, as academics, we have multiple demands on our time, and interesting opportunities to contribute to both academic and professional life, with the overarching requirement that we make a difference to society whilst delivering our roles.

### 4. Women in academic dentistry

Women in academic dentistry are part of a vibrant system that shapes the future through the work of its graduates, research, clinical care and health policy, pushing the boundaries of knowledge and influencing change. Thus, there are multiple dimensions to academic life to be considered in career planning (Fig. 2).

Academic dentistry, particularly in the junior ranks, is one area where there is also a notable increase in the number of women, although primarily in teaching roles [14]. Whilst educating the next generation is very important, and career tracks are possible through education, high quality research is key to academic promotion, even in education. At all levels, an academic career involves leadership and we would argue that to lead effectively women need to build and develop leadership skills and expertise as well as clinical, research and education skills, and do so from the outset. Leadership should not be left to others, but a role in academic dentistry involves inspiring and preparing the next generation of dental professionals, shaping the future clinically and educationally, researching to push the boundaries of

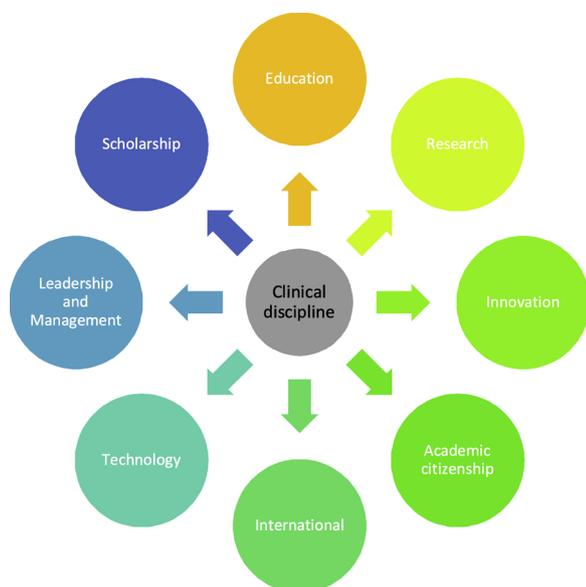


Fig. 2. Dimensions of academic life: multiple opportunities. Informed by Vongalis-Macrow (Ed), 2014 [18].

knowledge, and creating bridges to other disciplines and institutions worldwide.

The level of interest in an academic career varies over time and by country. More young people than ever are studying masters and doctoral programmes; and, having spent so much time in academia, may be interested to explore an academic career in science.

Research suggests that women are often attracted to dentistry, because they have sought a ‘professionally contained career within healthcare’ in which ‘features of the job’ are considered attractive [15]. These include having no out-of-hours, on-call responsibilities, the ability to work part time and great potential flexibility to balance the demands of professional and family life. And a career in dentistry does provide just that for the individual, particularly if working in the routine provision of clinical care, which is the case for at least four out of five dentists. However, this is not the case in academia which brings with it the additional challenge of professional leadership. It is

important to remember that only a small proportion of women working in dentistry is required to contribute to academic leadership to ensure there is a balance with male counterparts and that our institutions, as well as the profession of dentistry, are led by men and women in partnership.

Commenting that ‘the spirit of discovery and research’ is essential to drive improvements in patient care and public health [16], the UK Dental Schools Council recognises that it is imperative to develop future leaders as *change agents*. Women need to be encouraged to engage in leadership roles if they are to play a part in meeting these expectations. There is a range of career opportunities in academic dentistry and particularly for senior research active staff.

### 5. Identifying and embracing challenges: issues for women

The challenges facing academics in dentistry are similar to those of our medical counterparts [17], and academia in general [18]. Yet there are good examples of action to support women challenging systems, culture and behaviour which are inappropriate, to enable women to flourish. Within the UK, many dental and medical schools have signed-up to the Athena SWAN Charter [19], which aims to improve the representation of women in STEMM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine). Depending on their level of engagement with the 10 principles of the Charter and demonstrated through a rigorous application process, institutions may receive Bronze, Silver or Gold awards, depending on the extent to which they adopt these principles within their policies, practices, action plans and culture. Several specific challenges for women in academic healthcare are explored below, with suggested solutions summarised in Fig. 3.

#### 5.1. Organisational norms and culture

Whilst workplace culture has changed and is changing, it is still recognised as a major barrier to women in academia [18], and the health professions [17]. Embedded in organisational culture are perceptions of leadership behaviours and these have been found to be associated with masculine behaviours. The same leadership characteristics, viewed positively in men, may be perceived negatively in women [19]. Management sciences also suggest that women are less likely to put themselves forward for a job if they don’t think they are fully equipped to do so, whereas men are more likely to apply [18], and

You	Your context
<p><b>People</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build networks</li> <li>• Use role models (positive and negative)</li> <li>• Seek mentors</li> </ul> <p><b>Informed personal reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know your strengths</li> <li>• Manage your weaknesses</li> <li>• Read about the sector, leadership, and management</li> <li>• Consider your career trajectory and aspirations</li> </ul> <p><b>Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become visible in your organisation(s)</li> <li>• Take courses on leadership</li> <li>• Take on some but not <u>all</u> the service roles</li> <li>• Ensure you actively develop your areas of expertise</li> <li>• Be successful in the roles you have</li> <li>• Document your experience well</li> <li>• Don’t wait until you have ALL the requirements and are over-qualified before applying for jobs</li> </ul>	<p><b>University and Dental School</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn the realities of promotion: ‘the rules’</li> <li>• Understand others in the system: learn how to work with them</li> <li>• Understand the context: eg the issues with which your organisation and faculty is grappling</li> <li>• Consider what your institutions should be doing: you may have a clearer view than others</li> </ul> <p><b>Professional discipline</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain an overview of your discipline and where it is going</li> <li>• Reflect on your contribution: past, current and future</li> <li>• Contribute to future action and success</li> </ul>

Fig. 3. Planning for career advancement and leadership roles in academia.

believe that they have the skills or will have the ability to rise to the challenge of the role. The effect of gender stereotyping on women's leadership potential needs to be recognised and action taken to reduce any negative impact. This may be more difficult in parts of the world where women do not have the same legal rights as men.

### 5.2. Family life

Despite the support available, and changing attitudes in society to family life, carer roles (child care in particular) still tend to be primarily the domain of women. Maternity leave can last for up to one year and this is a long time in an academic career. Some women choose to use this time to write or gain an additional qualification – but they are in the minority. Reintegration after that time is a challenge given the speed of change, although 'keeping-in-touch days' throughout this period can assist. Some women choose to work part-time when their children are young, whilst others continue to work full time, but perhaps compromise on other aspects of life such as sleep. Whilst it is inevitable that such responsibilities may slow career development for women, with thoughtful planning, academic careers can be maintained (both the authors are mothers). Support for working mothers differs greatly between countries and is a major issue for society as well as organisations. It is important for women to explore, and use, what assistance is possible within the organisation including flexible working options [18]. An additional challenge is that children's education, and the careers of partners, may reduce the flexibility for an academic move. It may also mean that women who do move may have to accept that their home and work are in separate locations, bring new implications for them and their family, friends.

### 5.3. Mentors and champions

The majority of people who take on a senior role have been supported by champions and mentored through career progression, often informally [18]. Many universities now have formal mentoring and support schemes (particularly where they have signed up to the SWAN Charter) to facilitate career progress and realizing aspirations. Where such support is available, women should use mentors as this is vitally important. All aspiring academics should seek appropriate mentors. To do this may be challenging if there is no formal support structure and may involve going outside the dental school to another institution or to our medical counterparts for support. Understanding more about what mentoring involves, and the best ways of engaging with the process, is extremely important and a valuable opportunity to gain tailored support during an academic career.

### 5.4. Selectivity and celebration

Building relationships, networking, understanding and actively contributing to meeting the requirements of the system cannot be underestimated. Contributing to committees and working parties is helpful and being prepared to step forward and offer to do this may be essential. However, being strategic is imperative, making sure that there is a balance between personal purpose and the greater professional and institutional good. And do remember to celebrate success along the way!

## 6. Summary

This is a unique time when third level education is widely accessible

and when females hold, and have held, senior academic positions in universities as professors and deans, and contribute as chairs or members of working groups in our institutions. Externally they contribute as presidents of associations and chairs of committees and working groups, nationally and internationally. Looking back several decades, the world was very different. Women must question whether we are throwing away the privileges for which past generations have fought, if we do not contribute to the leadership of our profession, discipline, or organisation. Every country and educational institution, therefore, needs to consider how to support interested and able women into leadership – we want the brightest and best in our professions to lead us, whatever their gender, as evidence suggests that diversity is lined to creativity. Safeguarding academic careers is vitally important for the future of science and dentistry.

Taking a leadership role in academic dentistry provides women with the opportunity to challenge and shape the future of dentistry through discipline or specialty, education, profession and healthcare; to act as a role model for others and to become part of a world-wide professional network. Readers are encouraged to examine the UK Athena SWAN Charter [20], and its 10 key principles, promote and live them to support women in higher education. So please consider the challenge and lend your support!

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