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2. THE VOICES OF THE WOMEN IN UNIVERSITIES

This chapter presents the voices of the fourteen senior university women who were interviewed. It intends to represent what these women had to say about several issues. The first issue is the sorts of things that have been important to them and have motivated their efforts to influence things and to make a difference in the university setting.

The second is the range of ways in which they have developed the bases on which to be influential in that setting. The third is the specific ways in which they have gone about being influential, either in face-to-face situations or more indirectly. The fourth issue concerns the challenges that they have experienced in establishing and exercising influence, with a particular focus on issues of gender.

The themes chosen reflect the first three driving interests of the research project: to explore how these women describe their experiences of exercising leadership in their work place; how they say they take up formal mandates to lead and/or mandate themselves to lead; and how any differences in positional versus non-positional leadership practice are experienced.

The chapter attempts a minimum of commentary to interpret or explain the words of the women. The intention in writing the chapter was to use a light touch in selecting, arranging and presenting what they had to say. Readers are encouraged to make their own sense of the words of these women, and then to compare that understanding with the interpretations offered in other chapters of this book.

The chapter begins with a description of the roles taken up by these professors and the contributions they have made. In each group of quotations from the transcripts, individual quotations are from different women.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND PATHWAYS

The experience of these women spans several decades in a range of positions that have offered them many significant opportunities for leadership. All have professorial status, with three occupying senior roles in the executive team of the Vice-Chancellor of their university. In the course of their careers and to the present time, the women in this sample have been heads of academic groups in universities and of major projects in industry, directors of research centres, and leaders of national and international disciplinary councils. They have been leaders of significant research teams funded through the competitive discovery and lineage grants awarded by national research councils or sponsored directly by industry. Many lead other significant engagements with industry, government and the

community; supervise large numbers of graduate students; and have operational responsibility for the day-to-day management of academics involved in research, teaching and consultancy.

As well as being disciplinary leaders in their university, in some cases they are international experts who have pioneered innovations in practice, developed new theory and established institutes that continue to offer global leadership. Their discipline strengths include mathematics, engineering, science, information technology, biotechnology, education, business studies and social sciences. The three members of the Vice-Chancellor's executive team work at the centre of the University and have responsibility for developing and leading major strategic projects. These include academic quality and accreditation, and the transformation of the focus, marketing strategies, skills, culture, technology and processes of the entire university. The other eleven are located in faculties or research centres.

Most of the fourteen have occupied multiple roles simultaneously, either in Australia or in previous roles overseas. Many are career academics who have worked their way through the ranks. A few have started in industry or government, reaching executive positions from which they have managed hundreds of people and/or very considerable budgets and policy development. Most have changed institutions at least once. Most described themselves as having significant levels of leadership experience, including a small number who achieved senior levels of executive leadership in industry before taking up academic roles.

THE DRIVERS FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH LEADERSHIP WORK

This section of the chapter explores the ways in which the women were drawn into their leadership work. Specifically, they were asked to reflect on the sorts of issues, people and situations they had been particularly interested in influencing over the course of their careers. For two of the members of the Vice-Chancellor's executive team, their enduring interest has been in thinking and planning at organisational level, getting organisations to be effective in what they do, setting challenging strategic goals and transforming organisational capacity across the board to achieve them.

