* **Presentation title** (160 characters)

Iron fists in velvet gloves: Exploring female educational leaders’ experiences in Higher Education in the UK

* **Summary of the research paper to be used in the conference programme** (100 words)

This multiple case study explored 40 female educational leaders’ current experiences in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to unravel both barriers and facilitators using semi-structured interviews and opportunity and snowball sampling. It revealed that they still face sex-related barriers but have more support as more women have entered HEI. Despite limitations, the study highlights the facilitators of female educational leaders’ advancement and indicates that the redeﬁnition of capabilities of successful leaders and modern trends such as reverse mentoring and gender-neutral recruitment may assist to eliminate gender bias and highlight attractive traits that female educational leaders bring to the table.

* **Research focus, rationale, and questions** (250 words)

As Gouthro et al. (2018) observe, the literature on learning organizations, which claim emancipatory promises in principle, ignore issues of gender which, in practice, are a distinctive and deﬁning feature of our workplace contexts. Female leaders face multiple barriers in their effort to reach senior leadership positions in HEI and their challenges have been vividly portrayed by various researchers (Nguyen, 2013). Gendered institutional cultures, formal and informal gendered practices, and caring responsibilities are only some of the obstacles that they may face (Rudman et al., 2012). Major facilitators for female leaders are the provision of flexible work, mentoring/coaching schemes and equality training (Hannum et al., 2015; Equality Challenge Unit, 2017).

The current article addresses a ‘gap’ in the literature on female educational leadership in HEI in the UK (Gedro et al., 2020). As there is not sufficient research on this issue in the UK (Macfarlane and Burg, 2019), it was deemed as necessary to have this exploratory study in the current context. Only 22% of female academic staff, who comprise 45% of academic staff in Higher Educational Institutions (HEI), become senior educational leaders although most Higher Education (HE) students (56%) and staff (54%) are currently women (ECU, 2017). HEI are facing significant challenges requiring traditional leadership to be rethought and renewed. Only then can HEI move forward and attain sustainable aims and guide the societies they live in into becoming more equitable and fairer (Kioupi and Voulvoulis, 2020). The current study aims to answer the following research questions:

* Which are the main guiding principles of female educational leaders in HEI?
* What are the barriers and facilitators that female educational leaders face in their careers?
* **Research methods** (150 words)

The current study used an exploratory multiple case study qualitative approach to explore forty female educational leaders’ experiences of leadership in HEI at four HEI in London, UK (Gustafsson, 2017). The study used a qualitative semi-structured interviewing data collection method which is more suitable for exploratory studies that implement interpretive philosophy (Saunders, 2016). Using opportunity and snowball sampling processes due to time, money, and access limitations (Patton, 2002), forty women participated in this study. Although case studies are not credible, undoubtably carry interviewer and participant bias (Punch, 2013) and have low reliability, validity, and replicability (Cohen et al., 2013), this study showed meticulousness and precision but admitting that its research findings will probably not be generalisable. Participants had to sign an informed consent form and their anonymity was guaranteed. All interviews were recorded, data was analysed using thematic analysis and the coding followed loosely grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

* **Research findings** (250 words)

The female educational leaders of this study depicted their passion for inclusivity and ethical leadership and stressed their reliance on collaboration, compassion, and authenticity as their guiding principles. They also expressed their strong belief in transparency as they tried to be open to their followers.

They relied on their family and a trusted circle of friends, and were facilitated by collaborative female and male colleagues, short-term mentoring, informal coaching and working part-time when they had caring responsibilities. However, these responsibilities, the sexist environment and the lack of long-term mentoring and formal coaching were some of the barriers they faced. Female leaders clearly indicated ways in which organizational systems, habits and beliefs treated women unfairly while they tried to progress in their careers, e.g., unfair practices on women coming back from leave and prejudice against female employees in selection and advancement by favouring 'people like us' (Pollack, 2015).

They also had to undertake ‘academic housework’ and complained about their work/life balance and the so-called ‘boys’ club’ which posed barriers in their progression to senior leadership. Female leaders in our study were inclusive towards their staff as they provided coaching and mentoring and showed respect and discretion. They were fair and transparent to their followers giving them credit and encouraging them to get promotions. Finally, they felt uncomfortable about getting feedback and opted for constructive criticism instead.

* **Practical importance and implications of research** (250 words)

**Research implications:**

Future research needs to be planned in more HEI, involving more stakeholders from wider HEI contexts. It would be worthwhile to compare the facilitators and the challenges of female educational leaders in the UK with those in other European countries. The similarities and differences in female academic leaders from such comparative studies would advise universities on ways to better empower and advance female educational leaders. Such specific knowledge is very important in building gender equity in these contexts.

**Implications for practice:**

Female educational leaders face a lot of challenges at HEI, but there are ways in which HR departments can support them. Explicit, clear hiring and advancement criteria can assist to eliminate the impact of the ‘old boys’ networks. To address gender prejudice in manager’s assessments, managers and administrators who participate in the hiring, selection, and advancement processes of HEI should be trained (Smith, 2020). To change this status quo, HR managers with similar problems could use policy measures, e.g., gender-neutral recruitment, transparent gender practices and selection processes and preferential treatment of women.

Sponsoring, coaching and reverse mentoring could also help senior male or female leaders get to know these young, talented colleagues and hopefully take their perspectives on issues affecting HEI specifically and the society at large into consideration (Ibarra et al., 2013; Morris, 2017).

Finally, HEI HR departments should promote awareness of gender equity, assistance for women's network, implementation of a gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming to inspire, attract, and retain female educational leaders to challenge the male-dominated status quo and stimulate cultural change.

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