

## Research Article

**Cite this article:** Inarda, A. V. (2026). Enduring Spirit through the Odds: Phenomenologizing the Experiences of Women Academic Leaders in a VUCA Environment. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 21, e2026025.  
<https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2026.21.25>

Received September 12, 2025


Accepted January 19, 2026

**Keywords:** Higher Education leadership, Phenomenological-transcendental, Triangulation, Women Leadership, VUCA environment

**Author for correspondence:**

Analyn V Inarda

 [analyn.inarda@urs.edu.ph](mailto:analyn.inarda@urs.edu.ph)

 University of Rizal System, Philippines

## Enduring Spirit through the Odds: Phenomenologizing the Experiences of Women Academic Leaders in a VUCA Environment

Analyn V Inarda 

**Abstract**

**Background/purpose.** The educational landscape is evolving to meet the need for gender-responsive and effective leadership practices that align with the diverse needs of stakeholders. Furthermore, the challenges and strategies required to thrive in a higher education environment are significant in the face of a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) driven reality. This study aims to explore the strategies employed by women academic leaders in a VUCA environment to survive and thrive in the ever-changing educational context.

**Materials/methods.** The issues were explored in a state university in the Philippines using a phenomenological-transcendental qualitative approach. Purposeful sampling was used with sixteen (16) participants. Interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was utilized to examine the data, with results validated through triangulation and member checking.

**Results.** Findings revealed that relational leadership has been crucial in sustaining commitment and support, fostering a mindset of adaptability and innovation. Gender dynamics underscored both the reconceptualization of women as academic leaders and skepticism about their ability to manage responsibilities, with limited support systems making it difficult to achieve work-life balance. The findings lead to the creation of the RISE model, which can serve as a framework for guiding women's academic leadership in a VUCA environment.

**Conclusion.** The explored experiences revealed the survival and reconfiguration of leadership roles, as well as a shift toward a human-centered academic environment. This study contributes to the understanding of academic leaders' VUCA environment by highlighting the subtle yet powerful ways women navigate this landscape, demonstrating immense resilience that aligns with their personal and professional responsibilities.



OPEN ACCESS

© The Author(s), 2025. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

## 1. Introduction

Unprecedented changes are occurring in the global landscape of academic leadership (Rowe et al., 2023), and government-run colleges and universities in the Philippines operate in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. The pressure on higher education institutions has grown over the years, intensified by the external environment in a VUCA context. VUCA is a term that encompasses multiple dimensions, resulting in unpredictable environments that are challenging to comprehend and navigate. The occasion embodies the rapid shifts and inevitable dynamics in society, the economy, politics, and technology. Following its introduction, it was adopted by various fields, including the social sciences, to inform strategic decision-making and problem-solving. The VUCA environment presents daunting obstacles for leaders (Butler, 2019), particularly for women. It demands proactive thinking, adaptability, resilience, optimism, communicativeness, compassion, and intelligence to overcome adversity as a leader.

In the educational realm, where universities are not immune to the VUCA environment, conventional methods of organizational leadership may not effectively address the challenges it poses. Does it mean male leadership should be at the forefront? Although historically, males dominated the top levels of leadership in higher education, women are ambitious and desire excellent outcomes. The metaphor of a glass ceiling has transformed, no longer viewed as debatable. Authentic leadership is key for women leaders; however, it may require more flexible attributes to navigate adversity. The intersection of leadership in academia and the VUCA environment underscores the importance of understanding how women leaders experience challenges and opportunities as champions of their institutions. Research indicates that, despite gender equity programs, women continue to face scrutiny. Women are less fit for leadership because of the traditional notion that this job is for men; women are too gentle and do not fit the role, and focus less due to parenting obligations were some of the concerns that emerged from women leaders. However, amid these challenges in a VUCA environment, women currently exhibit diverse perspectives and experiences that are adaptable for driving organizations positively. This study sought to verify the integrity of the claim.

In various respects, the Philippines is the strongest advocate of gender equality in the East Asia and Pacific region and globally (Buchhave & Belghith, 2022). Despite the country's performance, women's labor force participation remains low. Home responsibilities primarily influence this, and they are permitted to hold government positions but often lack representation in the highest ranks (David et al., 2018). However, despite published statistics, women's leadership remains underrepresented in the country, and there is a notable shortage of articles discussing academic leadership in a VUCA environment. The study focuses on navigating, the strategies employed, and the support received amid a VUCA environment. Primarily, it is what middle management women academic leaders experience in a volatile environment, including natural disasters, political instability, health crises, technological disruptions, policy changes, and faculty turnover. This can provide insight into women's leadership practices that promote organizational effectiveness in the ever-evolving academic landscape. While there may be several pieces of literature on academic leadership in a VUCA world (Butler, 2019; Davis & Graham, 2018; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017), there remains a limitation on empirical studies exploring the experiences of women academic leaders in the Asian context since many are focused on Western settings (Fombona Cadavieco & Listopadzka, 2023; Miska et al., 2020; Syamsir et al, 2025). This study emphasizes a gap in navigating women academic leaders' experiences of survival, adaptation, and resilience in a country like the Philippines.

Furthermore, a universally adopted model is scarce specifically named women's academic leadership in a VUCA world which investigated the gender dynamics and initiatives for inclusion that can lead to the supportive environment of women academic leaders facing VUCA challenges; thus, this study steered the exploration of a model which is empirical, based on realizations, and

experiences or data (Churchill, 2013). When women's leadership is showcased, it can strengthen institutional resilience and help foster inclusive policies that support equity and effectiveness. This work is vital because it will address the limitations of the literature on women academic leaders in a VUCA environment. It will also highlight the natural and unique experiences of women as they survive and adapt to the changing landscape of education, thereby informing policy formulation among state universities in the Philippines.

Generally, guided by the stated rationale, the study aimed to explore the lived experiences of women academic leaders to inform the development of a proposed model and the formulation of a policy. The study examines a phenomenon revolving around the challenges and opportunities faced by women academic leaders in a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) environment. Specifically, it sought to meet the following specific questions:

1. How do women leaders navigate the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) nature of professional environments?

2. What strategies do women leaders employ to thrive and succeed amidst the challenges posed by the VUCA conditions?

3. How do organizational cultures either support or hinder the ability of women leaders to navigate and excel in a VUCA environment effectively?

The study may be limited in number, limiting its ability to generalize from a naturalistic perspective; however, the results were framed in a specific context, particularly the experiences of academic leaders at one higher education institution. Qualitative research does not aim for generalizability but rather an in-depth exploration of particular experiences or transferability (Carminati, 2018). Furthermore, findings were supported by published literature from the same context. However, this study captured experiences at a single point in time; other studies may employ a longitudinal approach to track changes in perceptions over time.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Women's Leadership in Education

Leadership roles are genderless (McNae & Vali, 2015), and the skills required for success are no longer defined by gender. The journey of women into academic leadership is complex, marked by challenges and development (Bilen-Green et al., 2009). Historically, women were excluded from academic leadership; however, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, significant developments in women's education increased their access to leadership opportunities (Rury, 1991). The glass ceiling is a common deterrent to this notion and has transformed into a labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Although women have been appointed to significant positions in universities, their participation rate remains lower, and they encounter limitations that affect their choices and decisions (Cheung, 2021; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Parker, 2015). Extensive studies have demonstrated that women in leadership roles have a significant impact on an organization's success (Lucchetti et al., 2023). These include organizational effectiveness, more significant innovation and creativity, and new approaches to decision-making. In other words, it brings new perspectives, resulting in a well-defined and inclusive environment that meets the current demands of academic culture.

Exploring education leadership is vital, as the new landscape of higher learning demands proactive goals (Lo, 2014) to thrive. In the Philippines, indicators of women's well-being are established and prioritized, with a focus on achieving gender parity in education. The Commission on Higher Education in the Philippines reported that of more than 2,100 higher education institutions, 39 percent, or 850, were led by women in 2011 (Gooch, 2012); these numbers have been growing for years. This phenomenon has emerged over time, and women have gained seats in critical

positions (Carli & Eagly, 2012), although they do not advance at the same pace as men (Thomas et al., 2004). The concept of women's leadership has diverse definitions, including transformational leadership (van Engen & Willemsen, 2004), which emphasizes the socialization process as more vital for nurturing subordinates, and women's greater participation than men (Eagly & Carli, 2003; van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). Additionally, in the academic sphere, female leaders are perceived as more sensitive to students' needs (Shollen, 2015). There is some literature published on academic leadership in higher education institutions in the Philippines (Barrot, 2024; Obmerga, 2024; Rosario, 2014), but none has been contextualized about women leaders in the VUCA environment.

## ***2.2. Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) Framework***

The volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) framework has gained popularity in recent years as a means of understanding the contemporary environment (Ezzeddine, 2023; Mack & Khare, 2016). It was introduced as a military jargon (Glaser, n. d.) and was first publicly published by Barber in 1991 (Wright & Wigmore, n.d.), which is now widely used either in public or private organizations to define a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world (Mack & Khare, 2016), thus, this idea has been used to describe an unpredictable environment. Volatility refers to the pace and capriciousness of change (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014); a lack of predictability is characterized by uncertainty. Complexity is defined as the connections between various components in a system, whereas ambiguity refers to a lack of clear meaning and haziness of reality (Robins, 2018). Understanding the VUCA lens might lead to more rational decision-making (Glaser, n.d.). Many scholars (Shet, 2024) have acknowledged these concepts to understand today's dynamic environment and guide the multifaceted aspects of management and leadership. Various stages and approaches require exploration to understand the VUCA landscape effectively. This may necessitate dexterous techniques, including strategic thinking, flexibility, adaptability, and partnerships.

## ***2.3. Women Leaders in a VUCA Environment***

Women steer the challenging environment in a VUCA world characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability (Showunmi et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, they continue to overcome them (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016) and showcase their skills at the table, resulting in resilience and victories. The remarkable agility leverages their insights to realize the multifaceted environment. Women commonly exhibit inclusive leadership (Schnackenberg & Simard, 2017), promoting holistic decision-making that makes the organization more responsive to its dynamic environment. The ability to thrive in uncertainty (Morley & Crossouard, 2016) enables them to be champions who cultivate relationships with their subordinates, enabling them to share their full potential and be proactive in an ever-changing world. It is crucial to recognize that women leaders in VUCA environments face numerous challenges (de Moura et al., 2018), including domestic political events, health crises, artificial and natural disasters, and environmental concerns, among others, that hinder their progress. Promoting equal opportunities to dismantle how women are viewed as leaders (Dingindawo et al., 2016) will be better, leading to supportive frameworks that foster them as progressive leaders.

The reviewed literature highlights the nexus of leadership, women's leadership, and the VUCA framework. VUCA underscores the need to become adaptive and resilient in shifting environmental conditions, while women's academic leadership is bringing new understandings and perspectives to the higher education landscape. They demonstrate new capabilities and a holistic approach, which serve as a driving force for survival with purpose and innovation. However, responding to a VUCA environment is still underexplored in the Philippine context. Thus, the study aims to explore the lived experiences of women academic leaders, providing empirical evidence on how they survive and contribute to an organization despite challenges, remove barriers to advancement in leadership, and persist in a VUCA higher education environment.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Design***

The experiences of women academic leaders were explored using a qualitative research approach. This offered flexibility to delve into the intricacies of the experiences in a VUCA context. Specifically, the phenomenological design was employed to understand the natural occurrences (Eagleton, 1983; Smith, 2018). The design features the slogan "back to the things themselves" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). The study used the phenomenological transcendental by Husserl (1982), who introduced the employing of reduction or epoché, which is "bracketing" or setting aside all assumptions or preconceptions about the external world, to focus on the structures of consciousness, including perception, to manifest impartiality, without influence by external theories or beliefs.

#### ***3.2. Research Participants***

This phenomenological study purposefully selects 3-10 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to achieve sufficient data, aligning with the work of Hennink et al. (2016), which emphasizes that these numbers are sufficient and that the codebook can be stabilized. Hence, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were strictly adhered to. However, the study also considered data saturation (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024), which means that the researcher used an iterative process (Neale, 2016); thus, after each data collection session, the researcher continuously reviewed and analyzed data to identify when saturation was nearing, resulting in sixteen (16) participants. They are purposefully selected based on experience related to the phenomena under exploration, as well as designated program heads and deans of the university's programs. The inclusion criteria are that participants must be women in familial roles with at least two years of experience in leadership positions, specifically as academic heads. They must express their willingness to participate in the study, particularly in the interview. Insufficient knowledge, unwillingness, or inability to participate and engage in the study are the exclusion criteria.

#### ***3.3. Interview Guide***

The study explored three central questions, and sub-questions were formulated and directly asked of the participants. As part of the validation process, experts reviewed each question for language, wording, and relevance (Majid et al., 2017); accordingly, modifications were made as necessary. The modified questions were used for the pilot interview with two participants (Majid et al., 2017) who were not part of the study. For both the pilot and the actual conduct of the study, a maximum of 60 to 90 minutes (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) of the interview was considered to ensure participants' commitment. A pilot interview aims to know the practicability of the research; the researcher can practice gaining experience for the actual conduct and observe how to build rapport with participants (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Majid et al., 2017), thus leading to the identification of limitations and flaws to be addressed before the actual interview. The questions were revised twice before the full-scale interview based on the expert's suggestions to make them more personal and comprehensive. After these processes, the questions were used to conduct the study. However, new questions also emerged during the interview, which displays the flexibility of qualitative research. Interview protocols (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) were prepared to guide the researcher in using a script during the interview, ensuring the informed consent form has been signed before the interview, using open-ended questions, however, beginning with more uncomplicated to difficult questions, practicing flexibility, and being mindful of the time spent during the interview without sacrificing the quality of data.

#### ***3.4. Data Collection***

To ensure the principle of trustworthiness, the study is guided by the works of Korstjens and Moser (2018), particularly in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and

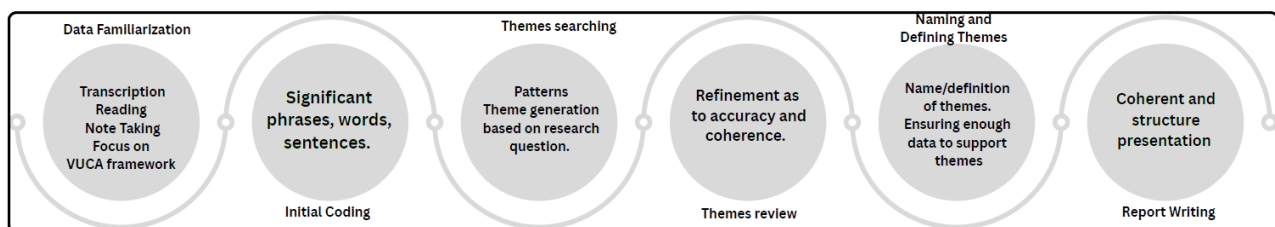
reflexivity, which are all embedded in the processes undertaken. The researcher employed reflective listening and an open-minded approach during the interview. They were conducted privately (Arifin, 2018), face-to-face, and via Google Meet, depending on participants' availability. All the data collected was stored and protected with a password on a computer device. Hard copies are stored in a secure location that is accessible only to the researcher.

### **3.5. Reflexivity and Researcher Bias**

Reflexivity (Palaganas et al., 2017) was also practiced since the researcher is a faculty member of the same university. Before each interview, the researcher reflected on her positionality and maintained a reflexive journal to review her changing perspectives, thereby balancing objectivity with subjectivity. It ensures that the researcher's bias was guarded, as the journal documented assumptions, emotions, and decisions at every stage of data collection. Bracketing was applied systematically; thus, it maintains phenomenological reduction and refrains from the researchers' preconceptions.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis was followed. Figure 1 below illustrates the six steps of data analysis.



**Figure 1.** Six Steps Data Analysis

Emic-to-Etic transcription was used, which means the data were checked word by word. The researcher collaborated with another qualitative researcher (Francois et al., 2018), familiar with handling qualitative information, who reviewed the transcribed and coded data to ensure that all information was documented, organized chronologically, and reviewed repeatedly, ensuring that every piece of data was treated accurately. A cool-to-warm analysis was conducted to identify significant themes and sub-themes.

Results underwent member checking, in which participants reviewed the accuracy of the results and confirmed their agreement with the analysis and presentation (Creswell, 2005); this ensures the correctness of the report. On the other hand, the numerical performance of academic leaders over the past two years, as well as their policies and activities, including seminars conducted explicitly for women academic leaders at the university, were also analyzed to triangulate the findings. Expert triangulation was also employed, with five experts agreeing to review the study's findings and propose recommendations on its presentation and analysis.

### **3.7. Ethical Consideration**

On the ethical side of the study, informed consent forms were sent to participants via email, outlining the details of their involvement and the study's purpose, but not disclosing the central questions, the research process, or the procedures to safeguard their identity and data confidentiality. The form clearly articulates the study's purpose, type of intervention, voluntary participation, procedures, risks, benefits, and confidentiality statement. This study was conducted with the approval of the relevant participants and in accordance with the university's research ethics protocol.

## 4. Results

The study is phenomenological, meaning that the results derived are based on the experiences of the academic leaders who were purposefully and systematically selected for the study. The findings are presented in the order of the research questions. To ensure richness and a detailed account of the data, the study highlights thick descriptions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018), including direct quotes from participants that convey the original content and explain not only what the data show but also why they are significant in the analysis.

Research Question 1. How do women leaders navigate the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) nature of professional environments?

Themes: Adaptive leadership, Decision-making in uncertain situations, Balancing leadership and relationships, Promoting empowered teams and resilience, and Stress and self-reliance in leadership

### 4.1. Adaptive Leadership

Participants claimed that in a VUCA environment, academic leaders must consider both the institution's needs and their major stakeholders. Thus, the complementation of the institution's needs and those of its stakeholders has been explored. Harmonizing their needs is a challenge that requires systematic decision-making. The intertwining of roles and responsibilities is inevitable in a VUCA environment, underscoring the complexity of academic leadership. This complexity is evident in the fact that any activities, projects, or decisions made will have multiple effects on the university's stakeholders. As Participant 7 emphasized:

*"I have to consider multiple factors before I make a decision; I have the director, the manual of the students, and the concerns of other stakeholders, such as faculty members and the community."*

### 4.2. Decision-Making in Uncertain Situations

On the other hand, despite performing their roles, they sometimes feel confused about how policies are implemented and must deal with uncertainty. The university operates on 10 campuses; however, as the study reveals, its policies are interpreted differently, leading to inconsistent implementation. This often leads to non-compliance, which frequently frustrates academic leaders. It results in complex decision-making. This highlights the intricacy of being an academic leader; they must be adaptable, balancing the goals of meeting the Community's needs with regulatory requirements. As a participant claimed:

*"We always issue policies; however, due to differences of interpretation, we end up non-compliant." (P15).*

When unexpected circumstances arise, they adapt and work to overcome the challenges they bring. As both academic leaders and family women, the participants found it challenging to balance the demands of their roles. Teaching, performing administrative functions, and personal obligations are very weighty. It necessitates emotional resilience; dealing with agitation, struggles, anxiousness, and frustrations is heartbreaking. For participants, the demanding environment stresses resilience as a means of survival.

They narrated that making decisions is essential for the organization to run smoothly. Typically, setups in middle management require approval from higher authorities, especially for critical issues or when innovations are proposed and implemented. Furthermore, as women academic leaders, they reiterated that they need to consider higher authorities when making or asking for decisions, but also deliberate within their families on matters that can significantly affect their personal lives.

Thus, there is a consensus among them. They consistently strike a balance between their professional and personal responsibilities. One said:

*"I am not weak in decision making; however, I have to weigh if it will affect my family." (P3)*

#### **4.3. Balancing Leadership and Relationships**

Women academic leaders are perceived as being soft-hearted; they approach others with kindness and tact. Convincingly, the participants emphasized their authority despite how others perceived them as leaders. However, they maintain authority while also being approachable. Thus, they are constantly reminded to separate their leadership from their stance to handle a VUCA environment effectively. A sense of maturity and professional boundaries is in place. Participants guarantee open communication. They ensured they were always present in the office whenever possible. Thus, they believed it could build trust and collaboration. Participant reiterated:

*"I created a mechanism which invites and maintains a feedback loop." (P6)*

#### **4.4. Promoting Empowered Teams and Resilience**

Strengthening the teams is needed. The members are a big help in continuously managing the unit's operations. This is part of navigating the professional landscape in a VUCA environment, ensuring it remains intact and prepared for inevitable changes. How do academic leaders do it? Primarily, they learn the team dynamics and manage conflict. It cannot be called a team when delegation and empowerment are not practiced. They let their subordinates perform related tasks. Thus, they believe it promotes flexibility. Teams are also encouraged to be resilient and adaptable. These are commonly blended with empathy and strategic guidance of women academic leaders. They asserted that part of their role is to act as a stabilizing force amid challenges, providing both emotional and professional support. They acknowledge the uncertainties but encourage everyone to face problems and be persistent. Fostering a growth mindset, letting faculty and students face and embrace changes, and positively seeing them as opportunities. Participant 11 emphasized:

*"If being resilient is practiced and taught, the organization will ensure smooth operations despite the changing environment."*

They acknowledged that holding a position and performing the various functions of state university faculty — such as instruction, research, and extension — can be stressful. Being an academic leader requires additional tasks that do not entail more compensation. As they quoted it, "for the love of the country." Given the reality of the situation, they continue to perform their tasks, and, as women, they reasoned, it is because of the trust placed in them to hold these positions. However, even if the mind is willing, the body is not. Many of them are besieged with emotional and physical stress, which is due to the high-stress work environment. Women have demanding roles and responsibilities, and stressors lead to exhaustion and health-related issues. Some of the participants experience headaches every day, which leads to high blood pressure, while the effects on others are different, including gaining weight due to stress eating.

#### **4.5. Stress and Self-Reliance in Leadership**

Given the situation, which heightened the work-related stress of the women academic leaders, the organization is expected to assist in managing the problem. Surprisingly, participants rely on personal stress management. They reiterated making their coping mechanisms. Participants expressed various views, like watching movies, shopping with family, and exercising. At the same time, one participant deviated, becoming lazy and refusing to perform her duties for a period.

Although this reflects individual strength, working in high-stress, changing environments might lead to serious consequences. It may affect participants in the future, as it can lead to a continuous

deterioration of their health conditions. Thus, it can influence the quality of their decision-making, increasing the risk of mistakes and, at worst, leading to a serious illness. Additionally, they face challenges in maintaining a work-life balance. There are times when family time is affected by their workload. The filial obligations are disrupted by their school responsibilities. One of the participants said:

*"My daughter said, Mom, we do not bond much anymore." (P13).*

Research Question 2: What strategies do women leaders employ to thrive and succeed amidst the challenges posed by the VUCA conditions?

Themes: Relational leadership, Sustained commitment reinforced by support, and innovation and adaptability

#### **4.6. Relational Leadership**

From the academic leader's perspective, they value team members' involvement in sharing a common organizational purpose, which leads to relational leadership. Thus, the people will feel supported and valued members of the organization, resulting in a motivated team. Offering help and assurance while maintaining morale is vital to maintaining a high spirit among others. This fosters a workplace culture where employees feel valued, and their contributions are recognized. As one participant said:

*"I cannot deny, but help. I believe that whenever they confide in me, they expect me to help them in any way I can. I shall say part of our roles is providing guidance or a counselor, if that is the right term." (P5)*

They felt it was part of their moral obligation as women to keep their hands always open to anyone who seeks help. This strategy helped them build strong connections with people. They agreed that being designated as an academic leader entails embracing the rigors of both formal and informal communication, as these methods can strengthen relationships and foster a positive organizational culture. They naturally act as a stabilizing force; they claim to be forward thinkers, in effect, ensuring that collaboration and the effective accomplishment of tasks are in place, even in volatile or uncertain environments. They will not relinquish their roles, even if it means taking on extra tasks. The participants reiterated that only health-related issues and family reasons can stop them. A growth mindset holds that, whether small or significant accomplishments, one should focus on contributing to institutional progress.

They reiterated that it is part of their life's mission to shape the youth's minds; it deepens their attachment and effort, making it more difficult to turn their backs on their roles. Although they do not receive additional compensation, their service goes beyond financial rewards. They emphasized the importance of leaving a lasting impact and being remembered as the leader who helped the institution grow. Participants said it is a calling tied to their faith, and that their abilities as women are a testament to the role they have to fulfill that others cannot.

#### **4.7. Sustained Commitment Reinforced by Support**

Academic leaders found sustenance from friends, peers, and students; they helped them refresh and fulfill their roles. However, family support helps them stay resilient; it serves as a source of encouragement. They persevere with words of comfort, helping them fulfill their role as mothers by sharing household responsibilities and other filial obligations. The VUCA environment presents inevitable changes, but what remains constant for survival is the support from family, which is invaluable, particularly in fostering a shared purpose. They strive to do better, as their family is their inspiration. Participants stated:

*"In reality, without my family's support, I might have quit this role a long time ago. It burdens me; I am not complaining because it also gives me a sense of fulfillment, but there are times I am fed up because of the multiple obligations." (P4)*

*"The positive mindset I have is because of my family support." (P7)*

#### **4.8. Innovation and Adaptability**

Amid the challenges, participants continue to adapt and innovate, as this is a significant approach that involves seeking new ways to solve problems and rethinking traditional ones. It can be used to leverage technology, resource management, and continuous learning to enhance a leader's self-efficacy. Participant 6 said:

*"We worked in a state university, and there is always a scarcity of resources. We do not expect it to provide luxury, sophisticated, and complete supplies for faculty and students. However, we can survive; we spend our money or bring our resources."*

From all of these experiences, they aimed to learn continuously. They ensured that the challenges they faced brought them and their teams additional knowledge. They have also mentioned leveraging technology, which has enabled them to gather real-time data and make informed decisions.

Research Question 3: How do organizational cultures either support or hinder the ability of women leaders to navigate and excel in a VUCA environment effectively?

Themes: Gender dynamics in academic leadership, Structural constraints in innovation, Support system for women leaders

#### **4.9. Gender Dynamics in Academic Leadership**

The participants have not observed any gender bias among women leaders in the university. Women are recognized as capable leaders who display commitment in their roles. Although men are mainly selected as academic leaders, it is acknowledged that gender is not a basis for appointments. They stated that women exhibit a distinct and evolving perspective on leadership. Thus, this challenges the old notion of men's leadership space. This portrays an inclusive leadership culture that prioritizes competence over gender. Participant 4 said:

*"The basis of the appointment is not gender, but the educational qualification as stated in the Commission on Higher Education memorandum order of the program."*

Despite the recognition, others are still skeptical of women's leadership skills. The old cultural mindset still prevails, suggesting that leaders should be authoritative, thereby undermining women's potential. A form of stereotyping that needs traits to be attributed to men. However, this does not affect them. In these circumstances, they needed organizational support. However, it was revealed that the university lacks a leadership program for women leaders. Participants stated that this limitation hinders their ability to progress and advance in their leadership roles. A lack of mentorship highlights a gap in organizational culture efforts for women leaders.

#### **4.10. Structural Constraints in Innovation**

Rigid policies and hierarchical decision-making slow down the implementation of new ideas. Participants claimed they offer innovation and would like to introduce initiatives; however, they were hindered by tedious approval processes and a lack of support. They would not want to attribute it to gender issues; instead, they observe it as an organizational practice. They reiterated that culture should encourage everybody to take risks or experiment with new systems or processes. Participants claimed:

*"There is variability in administrative support; some are fostering innovation while others are less engaged." (P5).*

*"Even when faculty members identify gaps in the system and propose solutions and policies, leadership inaction prevents meaningful changes." (P8)*

#### **4.11. Support System for Women Leaders**

Women leaders should have a support system to ensure success in a VUCA environment. One of the participants' challenges is a lack of institutional support. While others have mentioned receiving informal support, such as conversations with higher authorities, as part of emotional backing, formal structures like policies are absent. Women must balance their careers and family obligations, and the limitations of structural support can hinder their progression. One said:

*"I just take it upon myself to manage my work-life balance; there is no formal support." (P3).*

There might be a consistent approach to the concerns of women leaders. Initiatives such as remote work options, flexible work hours, mentorship and leadership development programs, and the establishment of a peer support network where employees can share their strategies and experiences may be in place.

### **5. Discussion**

The results narrated how women academic leaders face difficulties, a finding similar to that of Bilen-Green et al. (2009) in a VUCA environment. They emphasized the contextual barriers that challenged the women leaders. Published literature has focused more on common challenges of women leaders; this study, in the Philippine context, however, demonstrated mastery in balancing serving the needs of various stakeholders, fulfilling the roles embodied in institutional goals, and prioritizing the services needed by students, faculty, and the Community. An argument for effective leadership, as supported by Odhiambo & Hii (2012), is that it involves balancing the expectations of various stakeholders. This reveals how women leaders practice relational, inclusive decision-making. Thus, there is a significant adjustment leading to sustainable and equitable leadership. The educational environment described in the study is supported by Rowe et al. (2023), who state that policies are driven by external factors such as global uncertainties. However, emotional resilience and personal adaptability are key mechanisms of today's women academic leaders. This is further echoed by John (2022), who reiterates that adaptive leadership is characterized by decisions made amid uncertainty. The study clearly contributes to theoretical understanding by showing that resilience is a collective practice shaped by people's expectations. Unlike Violon and Prado (2024), who see structures as hierarchical constraints, the study shows that structures can help build strong resilience to changing organizational dynamics and benefit from broadening how women's leadership is viewed through a relational lens.

Participants demonstrate professional competence; beyond this, responsibility reflects the balance between relationship and leadership. A culturally embedded "maternal" approach, highlighting the significance of seeking and giving support. Aligns with the idea of Vongas & Al Hajj (2015), who believe that empathy is the cultural image of women's leadership. On the contrary, it presents challenges when conflicts arise between being authoritative and approachable. Empathy can sometimes be exploited, leading to the need to set boundaries with the teams. The balancing act comes into play: being assertive while maintaining a culture of collaboration. Emotional labor (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020) has long been a guarded topic, as expectations for women leaders are disparate. Another prominent finding is the stress level participants experience; despite this, they remain still and continue to strive in the challenging environment. This is attributed to their multiple roles as women. Since no institutional psychological support exists to address the concern, personal coping strategies are the key to survival. Displaying resiliency is a vital indicator of existence.

However, a lack of structured support mechanisms may factor into the ability to excel. To support this finding, no recorded projects or activities have been identified to address this concern, although there are informal initiatives to boost morale. The study clearly implicates that women are compelled to survive and develop approaches to thrive amid limitations, underscoring endurance as a strategic tool.

The strategies employed are encapsulated into relational leadership, sustained commitment, innovation, and adaptability. These are the qualities demonstrated to navigate the VUCA environment. Relational leadership is the collaboration of members and leaders, where everyone feels valued and believes in common goals. It helps in fostering inclusivity and trust, among other benefits. This springs the pillars of support among academic leaders, ensuring their stakeholders' needs and feelings are considered. It highlighted that leadership is about providing direction and creating an educational atmosphere where everyone is valued, as reinforced by Eagly & Carli (2003), who advocate that effective leadership stems from trust and mutual respect.

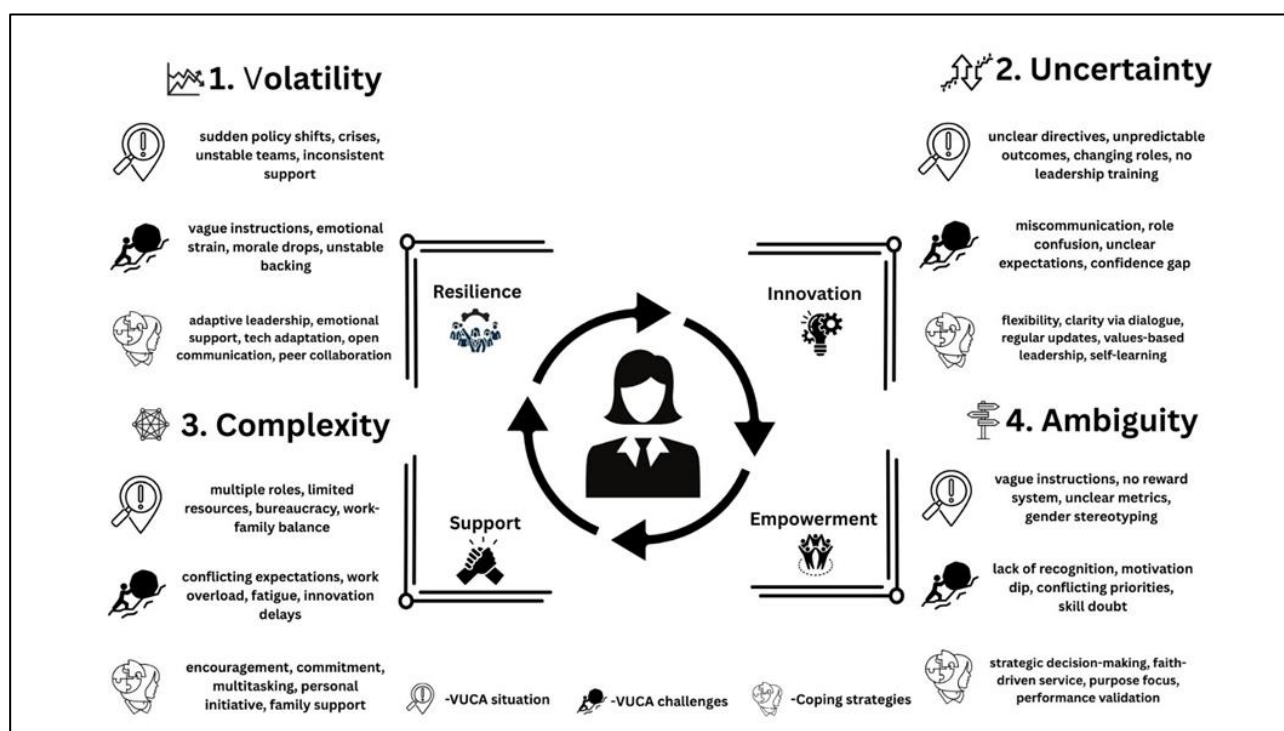
On the other hand, motivation does not rest on financial incentives. They acquired fulfillment through service and mentorship; the concern for students (Shollen, 2015) compensates the effort. The findings communicate the growing belief that human-centered leadership can thrive and succeed even amid uncertainties and resource constraints.

Additionally, strong support from family and peers is needed to navigate the complexities. It is not a solitary endeavor; reinforcements are still required. Continuously steering the roles assigned, being resourceful, leveraging technology, and learning constantly are helpful. Adjustments to the rigors of technology have reshaped leadership approaches, enabling individuals to stay connected and informed. The demands on women's academic leadership in a VUCA world are challenging; therefore, there is a need to elevate the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences.

Gender dynamics continuously reshape the facets of women's academic leadership (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). They are recognized as capable leaders, and gender is not a provocative factor in the appointment. In the study context, individuals are selected based on merit. It is also confirmed by McNae and Valie (2015), who emphasized that the old notion has been changing, which is giving leadership space only to men. On the other hand, skeptical views about women's leadership still have not been eradicated. There are still prejudices, although they do not significantly impact women leaders' ability to secure leadership positions. This can be facilitated by consistent institutional support that continually empowers women. Relying on personal initiative and informal support networks can never sustain the endurance required to navigate the complexities (Parker, 2015) of academic leadership in a VUCA context. Providing the necessary tools, skills, and knowledge can be an additional arm to traverse adversities. Furthermore, balancing work and life is essential for women and their professional commitments. This will help ensure that they can continuously harmonize their various roles and responsibilities.

The explored experiences revealed the survival and reconfiguration of leadership roles, as well as a shift toward a human-centered academic environment. The study's findings can be explained through a model. It is based on empirical findings that summarize the study's results. It effectively captures the journey of women academic leaders, highlighting the various challenges they face and the strategies they employ to overcome them. From these challenges, coping strategies have been developed, including the RISE Model—a framework that aligns effectively with the findings. Volatility arises from sudden policy shifts and crises, which are effectively managed through adaptive leadership, collaboration, and technical support. There is uncertainty about roles and unclear directives, which conflict with the need for flexibility, innovation, dialogue, and self-learning. The multiple responsibilities and bureaucracies in the process resulted in complexity, which is managed

through the development of support systems, including team encouragement, peer and family backing.



**Figure 2.** RISE Model: Women Academic Leaders Thriving in VUCA Environments

On the other hand, unclear expectations and gender stereotyping are described as ambiguity, which is navigated through strategic decision-making, improved performance, and a focus on their purpose. The core of the model is the woman academic leader who endures the challenges of VUCA conditions, transforming them into opportunities to prove and develop leadership skills. R is for resilience: the ability to survive despite limitations, challenging situations, uncertainties, and skeptical views of women's leadership. I stand for innovation by leveraging technology and being adaptive, enabling me to make informed strategic decisions. S is for support, emphasizing that roles cannot be accomplished without building networks and support from both the stakeholders and the family. Lastly, E is for empowerment, being friendly and approachable; however, they still emphasize the authority associated with their responsibility. The model was validated using the Delphi method (Thangaratinam & Redman, 2011), and the results are copyrighted and serve as a valuable resource for educators and experts in the field, elucidating how women academic leaders thrive in a VUCA environment.

## 6. Conclusion

The study explores the lived experiences of women academic leaders in a VUCA environment. Women academic leaders valiantly navigate this environment. Thus, it is no longer a rare occurrence but a new terrain of educational leadership. Resilience and a maternal approach are emphasized, maintaining a balance among the needs of all stakeholders. It enriches the challenges and strategies, thus highlighting that leadership is constantly transforming into a relational approach—the need to develop self-reliance to survive in a challenging workplace environment.

Gender-responsive actions emerge to navigate adversity and uncertainty. Women leaders' performance is preferably bolstered by emotional backing from family, which serves as a strength and a pillar of support. However, the institution's programs are lacking. The importance of supportive networks and innovation is valuable for women academic leaders to advance and progress in their roles.

While women are recognized as capable leaders in academia, they continue to face deep-rooted skepticism in the male-dominated leadership space. These challenges showcase the abilities in the workplace. At home, juggling family responsibilities without work-life balance complicates their roles as academic leaders.

## 7. Suggestion

The findings indicate that there is more to be done or revisited regarding policies and practices. The Philippines is a lower-middle-income country where resource scarcity is evident, serving as an eye-opener in a state university setting where faculty members are given additional tasks that may not encourage a balance between professional and personal obligations. Work-life balance is a prevalent global issue that involves maintaining well-being and productivity. Organizations should set clear boundaries to promote flexible work arrangements, considerate workloads, and prioritize employees' well-being.

The study may be limited in number, limiting its ability to generalize from a naturalistic perspective; however, the results were framed in a specific context, particularly the experiences of academic leaders at one higher education institution. This captures experiences at a single point in time; other studies may employ a longitudinal approach to track changes in perceptions over time.

## Declarations

**Author Contributions.** The study is a sole-authorship; she has completed all the work, including the literature review, conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, review and editing, and original manuscript preparation.

**Conflicts of Interest.** The author declares no conflicts of interest. This study requires no permission, as it does not include previously published materials that require approval.

**Funding.** The study is funded by the University of Rizal System in the Philippines.

**Ethical Approval.** The University of Rizal System's research ethics approval was secured for the conduct of the study. Participants signed and understood the informed consent forms before their conduct.

**Data Availability Statement.** Data were derived from the selected participants but are restricted to secure anonymity and confidentiality.

**Acknowledgments.** The researcher is indebted to the participants for their willingness to participate in the study and to the University of Rizal System for its approval and funding support.

## References

- Arifin, S. R. M. (2018). Ethical considerations in a qualitative study. *International Journal of Care Scholars*, 1(2), 29-32. <https://bit.ly/3TGIH9e>
- Barrot, J. S., Aranda, M. R. R., & Belleza, M. V. (2024). Academic managers' roles and challenges in migrating to interim online teaching: a higher education context. *Educational Review*, 76(7), 1936–1954. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2024.2316618>
- Bennett, N., & Lemoine, G. J. (2014). What a difference a word makes: Understanding threats to performance in a VUCA world. *Business Horizons*, 57(3), 311–317. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2014.01.001>
- Bilen-Green, C., Froelich, K. A., & Jacobson, S. W. (2009). *The prevalence of women in academic leadership positions*. North Dakota State University. <https://bit.ly/3PHMUqO>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Buchhave, H., & Belghith, N. B. H. (2022, April 11). Overcoming barriers to women's work in the Philippines. *World Bank Blogs*. <https://bit.ly/4cA7jYK>
- Butler, J. (2019). Learning to lead: a discussion of development programs for academic leadership capability in Australian Universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 42(4), 424–437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2019.1701855>
- Carli, L. L., & Eagly, A. H. (2012). Leadership and gender. In D. V. Day & J. Antonakis (Eds.), *The nature of leadership* (pp. 437-476). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Carminati, L. (2018). Generalizability in qualitative research: A tale of two traditions. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28(13), 2094–2101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732318788379>
- Cheung, F. N. (2021). International briefs for higher education leaders. *American Council on Education*. <https://bit.ly/4czqXnD>
- Churchill, D. (2013). Conceptual model design and learning uses. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 21(1), 54-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2010.547203>
- Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- David, C. C., Albert, J. R. G., & Vizmanos, J. F. V. (2018). Sustainable development goal 5: How does the Philippines fare on gender equality? *PIDS Discussion Paper Series*, 2017-45. Philippine Institute for Development Studies. <https://bit.ly/3VGIQzI>
- de Moura, G. R., Leicht, C., Leite, A. C., Crisp, R. J., & Gocłowska, M. A. (2018). Leadership diversity: effects of counter stereotypical thinking on the support for women leaders under uncertainty. *Journal of Special Issues*, 74(1), 165-183. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josi.2018.74.issue-1/issuetoc>
- Dingindawo, N., Nwafor, A. O., Mutshaeni, N. H., Mudzielwana, N. P., & Mulovhedzi, S. A. (2016). Redressing past injustices through affirmative action: Creating opportunities for women to assume leadership positions in the society. *Journal of Educational Studies*, 15(2), 180-196. <https://bit.ly/3VNTk6G>
- Eagleton, T. (1983). *Literary theory: An introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Eagly, A., & Carli, L. (2007, September). Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://bit.ly/4as8E28>
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2003). The female leadership advantage: An evaluation of the evidence. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14(6), 807–834. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2003.09.004>
- Ezzeddine, R., Otaki, F., Darwish, S., & AlGurg, R. (2023). Change management in higher education: A sequential mixed methods study exploring employees' perception. *PLoS ONE* 18(7), e0289005. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0289005>
- Francois, J., Sisler, J., & Mowat, S. (2018). Peer-assisted debriefing of multisource feedback: An exploratory qualitative study. *BMC Medical Education*, 18(1), 36. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-018-1137-y>
- Fombona Cadavieco, J., & Listopadzka, E. (2023). Educational and leadership strategies to face the new European VUCA scenario. *Educatio Siglo XXI*, 41(2), 83–104. <https://doi.org/10.6018/educatio.555851>

- Galsanjigmed, E., & Sekiguchi, T. (2023). Challenges women experience in leadership careers: An integrative review. *Merits*, 3(2), 366-389. <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits3020021>
- Glaser, W. (n.d.). Where does the term VUCA came from? *VUCA-WORLD*. <https://bit.ly/3TXq0OG>
- Gooch, L. (2012, November 5). Philippines Leads Pack in Promoting Female Academics. *The New York Times*. <https://bit.ly/4aipxMJ>
- Heffernan, T. A., & Bosetti, L. (2020). The emotional labour and toll of managerial academia on higher education leaders. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 52(4), 357-372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1725741>
- Hennink, M. M., Kaiser, B. N., & Marconi, V. C. (2016). Code saturation versus meaning saturation: How many interviews are enough? *Qualitative Health Research*, 27(4), 591-608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316665344>
- Hoyt, C. L., & Murphy, S. E. (2016). Managing to clear the air: Stereotype threat, women, and leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(3), 387-399. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.11.002>
- Husserl, E. (1982). *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology* (7th eds). Kluwer Boston, Inc.
- Jacob, S. A., & Furgerson, S. P. (2012). Writing interview protocols and conducting interviews: Tips for students new to the field of qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(42), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1718>
- John, R. (2022). *Adaptive leadership in higher education: Complexity, diversity, and inclusion* (Publication No. 30242973) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/83834/John.pdf?sequence=1>
- Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24(1), 120-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092>
- Lo, W. Y. W. (2014). Think global, think local: The changing landscape of higher education and the role of quality assurance in Singapore. *Policy and Society*, 33(3), 263-273. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2014.09.002>
- Lucchetti, M., Zhu, C., & Caliskan, A. (2023). Perceived gender barriers and recommendations for addressing gender inequality in academic leadership: a thematic analysis of MOOC discussion forums. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2023.2274364>
- Mack, O., & Khare, A. (2016). Perspectives on a VUCA World. In: Mack, O., Khare, A., Krämer, A., Burgartz, T. (eds) *Managing in a VUCA World* (pp. 3-19). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16889-0\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16889-0_1)
- Majid, M. A. A., Othman, M., Mohamad, S. F., Lim, S. A. H., & Yusof, A. (2017). Piloting for interviews in qualitative research: Operationalization and lessons learnt. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 7(4), 1073-1080. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v7-i4/2916>
- McNae, R., & Vali, K. (2015). Diverse experiences of women leading in higher education: Locating networks and agency for leadership within a university context in Papua New Guinea. *Gender and Education*, 27(3), 288-303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1027669>

- Miska, C., Economou, V., & Stahl, G. K. (2020). Responsible leadership in a VUCA world. In C. Miska & G. K. Stahl (Eds.), *Responsible global leadership* (pp. 18–35). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003037613-3>
- Morley, L., & Crossouard, B. (2016). Women’s leadership in the Asian Century: Does expansion mean inclusion? *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(5), 801–814. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1147749>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>
- Neale, J. (2016). Iterative categorization (IC): A systematic technique for analyzing qualitative data. *Addiction*, 111(6), 1096–1106. <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13314>
- Obmerga, M. E. (2024). For whom the bell (really) tolls: A grounded theory of millennial academic supervisors’ sensemaking of communitarian values as a springboard to enrich their transformational leadership attributes. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 27(2), 283-315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2020.1862919>
- Odhiambo, G., & Hii, A. (2012). Key stakeholders’ perceptions of effective school leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 40(2), 232-247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143211432412>
- Palaganas, E. C., Sanchez, M. C., Molintas, M. P., & Caricativo, R. D. (2017). Reflexivity in Qualitative Research: A Journey of Learning. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(2), 426-438. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2552>
- Parker, P. (2015). The historical role of women in higher education. *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, 5(1), 3-14. <https://bit.ly/43BaVpr>
- Rahimi, S., & Khatooni, M. (2024). Saturation in qualitative research: An evolutionary concept analysis. *International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances*, 6, 100174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnsa.2024.100174>
- Robbins, P. (2018). From design thinking to art thinking with an open innovation perspective—A case study of how art thinking rescued a cultural institution in Dublin. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 4(4), 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.3390/joitmc4040057>
- Rosario, A. H. (2014). Women presidents in Philippine higher education: Their personal and professional journeys. *International Forum*, 17(2), 5-24. <https://bit.ly/4cOE1G2>
- Rowe, L., Knight, L., Irvine, P., & Greenwood, J. (2023). Communities of practice for contemporary leadership development and knowledge exchange through work-based learning. *Journal of Education and Work*, 36(6), 494-510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2023.2255149>
- Rury, J. L. (1991). *Education and Women's Work: Female Schooling and the Division of Labor in Urban America, 1870-1930*. State University of New York Press.
- Schnackenberg, H. L., & Simard, D. A. (2017). *Challenges facing female department chairs in contemporary higher education: Emerging research and opportunities*. IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-1891-4>
- Shet, S. V. (2024). A VUCA-ready workforce: Exploring employee competencies and learning and development implications. *Personnel Review*, 53(3), 674-703. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-10-2023-0873>

- Shollen, S. S. (2015). Teaching and learning about women and leadership: Students' expectations and experiences. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 14(3), 35-52. <https://doi.org/10.12806/V14/I3/R3>
- Showunmi, V., Oplatka, I., Shakeshaft, C., & Moorosi, P. (2022). *The bloomsbury handbook of gender and educational leadership and management*. Bloomsbury Publishing
- Smith, D. W. (2018). Phenomenology. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>
- Syamsir, S., Saputra, N., & Mulia, R. A. (2025). Leadership agility in a VUCA world: a systematic review, conceptual insights, and research directions. *Cogent Business & Management*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2025.2482022>
- Thangaratinam, S., & Redman, C. W. E. (2011). The Delphi technique. *The Obstetrician & Gynaecologist*, 7(2), 120–125. <https://doi.org/10.1576/toag.7.2.120.27071>
- Thomas, K. M., Bierema, L., & Landau, H. (2004). Advancing women's leadership in academe: New directions for research and HRD practice. *Equal Opportunities International*, 23(7-8), 62–77. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02610150410787909>
- van Engen, M. L., & Willemsen, T. M. (2004). Sex and leadership styles: A meta-analysis of research published in the 1990s. *Psychological Reports*, 94(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.2466/PRO.94.1.3-18>
- Violon, J., & Prado, N. (2024). Leadership development and opportunities for women in higher education leadership roles. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 2(11), 353–361. <https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2024.0501>
- Vongas, J. G., & Al Hajj, R. (2015). The evolution of empathy and women's precarious leadership appointments. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 147021. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01751>
- Wright, G., & Wigmore, I. (2023, February 9). VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity). *TechTarget*. <https://bit.ly/3U0mldC>

### About the Contributor(s)

**Analyn V. Inarda**, DPA, is an Associate Professor at the University of Rizal System in the Philippines, with 25 years of experience. Her areas of expertise are in public administration, such as educational policy, leadership, human resource management, and organizational leadership. Dr Inarda has published research articles in reputable journals indexed in SCOPUS and is an Associate Member of the National Research Council of the Philippines (NRCP). She had authored books on Social Science Research.

Email: [analyn.inarda@urs.edu.ph](mailto:analyn.inarda@urs.edu.ph)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4610-2083>

## Appendix I.

### Interview Guide

Enduring Spirit Through the Odds: Phenomenologizing the Experiences of Women Academic Leaders in A Vuca Environment

Profiling of participants to establish robotfoto:

Years of experience as academic leader: \_\_\_\_\_

Position Handle: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Average performance for the last three years: \_\_\_\_\_

Awards received for the past five years: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you been invited to be a speaker in a conference/seminar on leadership-related topics: \_\_\_\_\_ (give details)

Does the university have a support network for women academic leaders: \_\_\_\_\_ (give details)

Have signed the informed consent form (Y/N): \_\_\_\_\_

Willing to participate (Y/N): \_\_\_\_\_

Interview introduction:

Good day! I am Analyn V. Inarda, a faculty researcher from the University of Rizal System, Rodriguez. I am happy to meet you today to participate in the study, "Enduring Spirit Through the Odds: Phenomenologizing the Experiences of Women Academic Leaders in a Vuca Environment." Because of your established qualifications, you have been chosen to participate in the study, provided that you affix your signature to the informed consent form. This study aims to understand the experiences, challenges, and strategies of women leaders in dynamic and unpredictable environments.

As a researcher, I aim to gain insights from you on your unique perspectives on applying your leadership in a VUCA environment. Your immense contribution will advance knowledge on this topic, which can further this principle. The interview will last for 60-90 minutes.

I will be asking a series of questions to delve into your experiences. Please state your willingness or unwillingness to agree to take pictures and record the interview process. Rest assured that the data obtained will be handled confidentially and used solely for this study. Please feel free to share your experiences, as they will be instrumental to the success of this study.

Central Question 1: How do women academic leaders in public organizations navigate the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) nature of their professional environments?

1. Can you describe a particularly challenging situation you've faced in your professional role as an academic leader that you would classify as volatile, uncertain, complex, or ambiguous?

2. What emotions or thoughts did you experience during the challenge, and how did they influence your decisions?

3. How did this experience shape your leadership approach moving forward, and what personal or professional growth did you gain from it?"

4. How do you approach decision-making when faced with a VUCA situation like the one you described? Please reflect on your thought process, the strategies you used, and how you navigated the complexities involved.

5. How did you involve your team or stakeholders in the decision-making process, and what role did their input play?

6. How do you build and maintain strong, effective relationships with key stakeholders (e.g., faculty, students, administration, and external partners) when navigating the challenges of a VUCA environment?

7. Can you share a specific instance where maintaining or building a relationship with a stakeholder was particularly challenging in a VUCA situation? How did you manage it?

8. How do you ensure that trust, communication, and collaboration are sustained with stakeholders, especially when circumstances are unpredictable or rapidly changing?"

9. How do you manage and lead your team during a VUCA environment, where uncertainty and complexity often shape daily challenges?

10. How do you communicate the vision or goals to your team when circumstances are volatile or unclear?

11. How do you manage stress and maintain your well-being while navigating a VUCA environment, both on an institutional and personal level?

Central Question 2: What strategies do women leaders employ to thrive and succeed amidst the challenges posed by the VUCA conditions within public organizations?

1. How do you build and maintain a strong network of support and resources during times of uncertainty and volatility in a VUCA environment? Reflect on the strategies you use to create meaningful connections that help you navigate challenges and grow both personally and professionally.

2. Can you share a time when your network played a pivotal role in helping you manage or overcome a particularly challenging VUCA situation? How did the support from your network make a difference?

3. How do you develop and sustain a growth mindset amidst the uncertainty and complexity of a VUCA environment? Reflect on the mindset shifts, strategies, and practices you adopt to stay resilient, adaptable, and open to continuous learning during challenging times.

4. What specific practices or habits do you incorporate into your daily routine to nurture your growth mindset, especially during times of stress or unpredictability?

5. How do you leverage technology and innovation to navigate and thrive in a VUCA environment?

6. What specific technologies or innovative solutions have you integrated into your leadership practices to address challenges in your institution? How have these tools helped you adapt to shifting circumstances?

7. How do you communicate effectively and build trust with your team and stakeholders during times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity?

8. What specific communication strategies do you rely on to keep your team informed and engaged when the situation is uncertain or rapidly changing?"

9. How do you ensure that your communication remains inclusive and accessible to all stakeholders, especially when dealing with diverse teams or external partners who may have different needs or perspectives?"

10. How do you prioritize and manage your time and resources when facing the challenges of a VUCA environment?

11. How do you decide which tasks or projects take precedence, especially when facing multiple competing demands or shifting goals?

12. How did you balance short-term needs with long-term objectives in that situation?

13. How do you ensure that your team or department is equipped with the resources and support they need to thrive, particularly when institutional resources are scarce or uncertain?"

Central Question 3: How do the organizational cultures that either support or hinder the ability of women leaders to navigate and excel in a VUCA environment effectively?

1. How does the organizational culture in your institution promote or, at times, hinder diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), particularly for women leaders navigating the complexities and uncertainties of a VUCA environment?

2. Can you share an example of how the organizational culture either supported or posed barriers to your ability to lead effectively as a woman in a VUCA context? What impact did this have on your leadership decisions or outcomes?

3. How do policies, practices, or attitudes within the institution either facilitate or challenge your efforts to promote DEI within your team or department during times of uncertainty?

4. How does the organizational culture in your institution either support or hinder the development and advancement of women leaders, particularly in the context of VUCA conditions?

5. How do leadership development programs, mentorship opportunities, or institutional policies (or the lack thereof) affect your ability to thrive and advance in your leadership journey amidst uncertainty and change?

6. How does the leadership team provide growth, learning, and advancement opportunities to women leaders?

7. How does the organizational culture in your institution encourage or discourage innovation and risk-taking, particularly for women leaders navigating VUCA conditions?

8. How does the organizational culture support or limit your ability to introduce new ideas, implement change, or take calculated risks, especially when facing ambiguity and shifting priorities?

9. How does the organizational culture in your institution support or hinder effective communication and trust-building, especially for women leaders navigating the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of a VUCA environment?

10. How do the organizational culture and its communication norms help or challenge your efforts to ensure transparency, inclusivity, and clarity in your leadership during uncertain and complex situations?

---

**Publisher's Note:** *The opinions, statements, and data presented in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributors and do not reflect the views of Universitepark, EDUPIJ, and/or the editor(s). Universitepark, the Journal, and/or the editor(s) accept no responsibility for any harm or damage to persons or property arising from the use of ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content.*

---