UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

FALF Female Academic Leaders Fellowship NPC

The Female Academic Leaders Fellowship in South African Higher Education

INTERNAL RESEARCH REPORT[1] 2023

This report documents the results of the research study designed to assess the FALF's impact on and document the fellows' experiences in their career trajectories.

A MESSAGE FROM THE FALF'S FOUNDER & CHAIR

As we celebrate our fourth year since the Female Academic Leaders Fellowship's (the FALF) birth, I am grateful for the support received from the University of the Witwatersrand's (Wits) leadership and the FALF Board of Directors. The support for an intersectional approach in the transformation of the academic leadership has enabled the FALF to support 91 fellows by 2024. This is in line with the FALF's vision to have 100 fellows within the first five years.

The FALF was established with a vision to address the persistent gender and racial disparities prevalent in academia, particularly the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. In keeping with the United Nation's (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10, which seeks to reduce inequality, we want to provide solutions for the most marginalised first; the FALF identified African and Coloured South African women as the social demographic least represented in leadership positions. Recognising the invaluable contribution of female scholars and the unique challenges they face, our fellowship seeks to cultivate a supportive environment where women can thrive and excel in their academic careers.

Providing funding for fellows' academic needs to enable career progression, and strategic initiatives such as mentorship programs, professional development workshops, and networking opportunities, the FALF aims to equip female academic leaders with the skills, resources, and support networks necessary to navigate the complexities of academia and advance their careers. By fostering a culture of collaboration, mentorship, and empowerment, we aspire to create a more inclusive and equitable academic landscape where all individuals can succeed and thrive, representation in leadership matters for the generations that follow, and for human dignity for the least represented.

We are incredibly grateful to our donors, whose generous support has made our work possible. Additionally, we extend our sincere appreciation to the Wits community, especially the transformation, employment equity, and research offices, all the FALF friends, and our partners for their unwavering commitment and dedication to advancing gender and racial equity in academia. Special thanks are due to the FALF Board for dedicating their time to the realisation of the FALF's vision.

This inaugural research report marks the beginning of an exciting journey for the FALF, as we are thrilled to announce that we will be sharing the overall impact that the FALF's has had on an annual basis. We look forward to highlighting the achievements and progress made by the fellows each year as we continue to foster a supportive environment for female academic leaders.

The year 2024 will see the launch of two FALF research chairs, one in gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) that will be hosted at Wits University and a second in entrepreneurship and financial inclusion (E&FI) to be hosted at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). This would not be possible without our partners the National Research Foundation (NRF) and Ford Foundation for the GBVF Chair and FirstRand Empowerment Foundation for the E&FI Chair. It is the FALF's vision to scale our initiatives to other South African public universities, and with the support of our partners, we are confident that we can make this vision a reality. Let us unite and work together to create a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for all.

Thank you for your continued support and dedication to advancing gender and racial equity in academia.

Dr Judy Dlamini

THE FALF FOUNDER AND CHAIR

THE FALF IMPACT STUDY PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS (PIS)

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PREFACE

In this inaugural report,[2] the findings of the first part of a longitudinal study aimed at evaluating the impact of the FALF program are presented. The longitudinal study will span the years 2021 to 2030 for comprehensive insights into the transformative effects of the FALF on its participants (called fellows) and the broader landscape of academic leadership. This report covers the period of 2021 to 2023 and comprises not only initial insights gleaned from the data collection, which commenced in May 2023 and concluded in August 2023, but also quantitative and qualitative data on various facets of the fellows' experiences, including their achievements, challenges, and professional advancements. By the time this report was completed, the FALF had added 20 new fellows for the 2024 cohort, bringing the total number of fellows to 91. Their progress will be documented in the 2024 report.

It is important to emphasise that this investigation is ongoing; as fellows continue their journey beyond August 2023, the commitment to capturing the evolution of their leadership trajectories remains steadfast. Subsequent phases of data collection will include the latest outputs, promotions, achievements, and challenges encountered by the fellows. Moving forward, data collection will unfold annually, with each collection cycle commencing in May and continuing to August and the report finalised in the first quarter of the following year. These sustained efforts will enable tracking of the longitudinal trajectory of the fellows, providing invaluable insights into the enduring impact of the program over time.

Furthermore, the findings will be disseminated to academic and practitioner audiences alike. Each year, a comprehensive report will be published and distributed to stakeholders, including Wits University, the FALF donors, and the broader academic community. Additionally, reports will be uploaded to the FALF website, ensuring accessibility to all interested parties.

We extend our gratitude to the fellows, whose dedication and contributions form the foundation of this study. Additionally, we express appreciation to all stakeholders, especially the FALF board who have supported and facilitated our research efforts. Together, we embark on a journey of exploration and discovery, united in our commitment to advancing female academic leadership.

FALF Study Principal Investigators : Lucy Khofi and Keratiloe Mogotsi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study and subsequent report were made possible by the fellows who dedicated their time to sharing their experiences of the fellowship. Thank you to the FALF community, for your valuable time.

Foremost, we thank the FALF directors, Dr Judy Dlamini (the FALF founder and chair), Professor Stella Nkomo, Professor Loyiso Nongxa, Professor Salome Maswime, and Dr Qhobela Molapo, for their continued guidance from the conceptualisation of this study to the final report. Your contributions are highly valuable and significant.

We would also like to thank the Wits University Transformation Office and the Wits University Research Office for sharing the datasets. Additionally, we acknowledge the Wits University Registrar's Office and all the faculty deans who have given us permission to conduct this study in their respective faculties: Health Sciences; Science; Commerce, Law, and Management; Humanities; and Engineering and the Built Environment.

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DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Key Terms	Definitions
Intersectional Feminism	Intersectional feminism considers the intersecting social structures of gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and age, among others, as interrelated and shaping one another.
African Female	According to the B-BBEE Act 53 of 2003, African people are defined broadly, namely African and Coloured by birth or descent. Ordinarily, it also includes Indians/Asians; however, the two races that are relevant to this report are African and Coloured.[3]
Coloured Females	Females who identify as South African mixed-race (Coloured South African women).[4] [5]
The FALF	The FALF non-profit company was founded by Dr Judy Dlamini, the Chancellor of Wits, in 2020. This initiative was informed by the slow racial and gender transformation at the leadership level in tertiary institutions nationally, especially when it comes to African and Coloured females. In South Africa, of the 26 vice chancellors, only four are women; of 30 deputy vice chancellors, only 12 are women; less than 5% of professors are African females.[6] The FALF's objectives are the transformation of academic leadership, increasing African and Coloured females as contributors to knowledge production, and the creation of role models and mentors. The FALF has focused its transformation goals at Wits.[7]

ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full Name
AFAM	Africa Academy of Management
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
E&FI	Entrepreneurship and Financial Inclusion
FALF	Female Academic Leaders Fellowship
GBVF	Gender Based Violence and Femicide
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
NRF	National Research Foundation
PBO	Public Benefit Organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TUT	Tshwane University of Technology
UN	United Nations
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The underrepresentation of women, particularly African and Coloured, in senior academic leadership positions in South African higher education warrants interventions to foster female leaders. The FALF at Wits serves as a local intervention, providing essential psychosocial, research, and financial support to 71 African and Coloured female academics.

The research analysed the impact of the FALF programme over a three-year period, from inception (2021) to 2023. The analysis is grounded in a feminist intersectionality framework. The objectives of this inaugural study included monitoring and evaluating the tangible outcomes of the FALF, tracking fellows' contributions to knowledge production, career advancement, leadership development and societal influence.

Employing a mixed-methods strategy, the research integrated sequential qualitative and quantitative approaches. Baseline data collection included in-depth interviews with fellows from each cohort to unravel the fellows' experiences within the program. The quantitative facet gathered baseline data on aspects such as their degree programmes, academic rank, research output, and leadership skills, and was supplemented by additional surveys.

The transformative impact of the FALF program is evident in the positive outcomes observed and reported by some of the fellows, such as enhanced academic profiles, fruitful collaborations, and career advancements. These outcomes aligned with the program's objectives and contributed to the cultivation of a community of female academics making meaningful contributions to their disciplines and society. However, the study also revealed persistent challenges and obstacles pertaining to gender and racial inequality, departmental politics, mental health strain, and increased workloads, which sometimes made it difficult for the fellows to advance their academic careers.

The feminist intersectionality framework used in this research provided a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by African and Coloured female academics, emphasising the need for tailored interventions that address the unique circumstances of different subgroups. The study recommends a fundamental shift in institutional practices, advocating for comprehensive measures that challenge the foundations of gatekeeping and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The discussion of the findings delves into the root causes of gender and racial inequality, departmental politics, mental health strain, and increased workloads. The importance of moving beyond financial support is emphasised, highlighting the significance of building a supportive community and proposing policy implications and recommendations. Overall, the findings stress the importance of institutional change in enabling African and Coloured women to thrive as academic leaders.

The conclusion underscores the pivotal role of local interventions, like the FALF, in addressing gender and racial inequalities in academic leadership. It emphasises the need for sustained efforts to create an inclusive and equitable higher education landscape, providing valuable insights for institutions globally to adopt and adapt in their pursuit of gender equality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite strides made, women continue to encounter marginalisation across diverse settings, presenting substantial challenges to achieving gender equity and accessing senior leadership and management roles within African universities.[8] This is further echoed in the UN's 2030 SDGs where gender equality is an aspiration in all spheres globally. Female leaders continue to navigate the complexities of altering current management discourses while contending with shifts in patriarchal hegemony.[9] The journey for females to attain senior leadership roles involves coping with and competing in a higher education system that is both patriarchal and racialized.[10]

The Female Academic Leaders Fellowship (the FALF) as an intervention aims to address the underrepresentation of African and Coloured women in leadership positions within academia, focusing on elevating their roles in knowledge production and leadership. Since 2000, women in South Africa constitute 60% of graduates at junior and honours levels, 44.6% at the masters' level, and 58.2% at the doctorate level. Despite these positive trends in women's education, there is still a glaring underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within higher education institutions, with African and Coloured women particularly scarce in top leadership roles.[11] Additionally, women typically took five years longer than men did to reach the zenith of their careers and gain respect in their research discipline.[12] The disappointment with these national figures highlights the urgency of initiatives like the FALF in promoting gender diversity and fostering equality in academic leadership.

1.1 THE BOARD

Despite strides made, women continue to encounter marginalisation across diverse settings, presenting substantial challenges to achieving gender equity and accessing senior leadership and management roles within African universities.[13] This is further echoed in the UN's 2030 SDGs where gender equality is an aspiration in all spheres globally. Female leaders continue to navigate the complexities of altering current management discourses while contending with shifts in patriarchal hegemony.[14] The journey for females to attain senior leadership roles involves coping with and competing in a higher education system that is both patriarchal and racialized.[15]

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The FALF board comprises distinguished individuals such as Professor Stella Nkomo, a renowned academic recognised with the Lifetime Leadership Achievement Award from The International Leadership Association. Nkomo is an emeritus professor in the Department of Human Resource Management at the University of Pretoria and served as the inaugural and founding President of the Africa Academy of Management (AFAM). She has contributed significantly to putting African leadership and management practices on the global map through AFAM, a thriving community she has nurtured since 2010. She is an A rated researcher and has held teaching positions at universities in North Carolina, Rhode Island, and South Africa.

Another notable figure on the FALF board is Professor Loyiso Nongxa, the first African Wits Vice-Chancellor (2003 to 2013), who retired as a Professor of Mathematics. Nongxa has been a key figure at Wits, serving in various leadership roles over 18 years, with expertise in Abelian Group Theory, representations of partially ordered sets, and the foundations of Data Science. He was the founding director (2014 to 2018) of the Centre for Mathematical and Computational Sciences at Wits.

Joining them is Professor Salome Maswime, a full professor and Head of Global Surgery at the University of Cape Town. Maswime, an accomplished Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, is a respected figure in global health leadership, holding positions such as President of the South African Clinician Scientists Society and Vice-President of the Women in Global Health South Africa.

Completing the board ensemble is Dr Qhobela Molapo, a former President of the National Research Foundation (NRF) and seasoned executive leader with extensive experience in policy and administration. Molapo is also Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Institutional Change, Strategic Partnerships, and Societal Impact at the University of the Free State. He has played a pivotal role in shaping the nature and operations of South African universities and the education system in general, with a deep understanding of the Higher Education System and the National System of Innovation.

United by a shared dedication to instigate positive societal change, these visionaries play a pivotal role in propelling the FALF forward. Each leader, eminent in their respective fields, comes together under the FALF banner with a collective commitment to empower and uplift women in academia. Their synergy is centred around fostering positive societal transformation through initiatives focused on education and leadership. This collaborative endeavour signifies a powerful force working towards greater inclusivity and equality within academic spheres, laying the foundation for a more diverse and equitable future.

On the 1st of June 2024, FALF hired a Chief Executive Officer as part of FALF management and staff. Professor Nthabiseng Ogude is an Analytical Chemist and Science Educator and has more than 30 years' experience in higher education. She has held senior management positions as Vice-President of the Pan African University, Vice-Chancellor of Tshwane University of Technology, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching, Learning and Student Affairs at the University of Pretoria, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic (Research and Teaching and Learning) at the then University of Port Elizabeth, as well as Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research, Technology and Innovation at the Nelson Mandela University. She was the first African woman to hold these strategic leadership positions. Her research interests are in the areas of science education/chemistry education, women in science, student access and success, higher education policy and academic management and leadership. She was an American Council on Higher Education Fellow at Kansas University, an Erskine Fellow at University of Canterbury in New Zealand and served as Chairperson and member of several University Committees and external Councils and Boards.

1.1 THE FELLOWS

The FALF actively advocates for and provides financial support to African and Coloured South African female academics. The FALF's primary objective is to reshape the racial and gender composition of academic leadership and knowledge production, fostering inclusion and equity.

Fellows often express how applying for a FALF grant is such an easy process. The FALF sends out a call across Wits, namely, the Transformation Office, all faculties, and schools. The call opens for approximately three months starting in July and closing in October each year. The fellows receive feedback in the first week of December and sign a contract. Eligible for the FALF funding are African and Coloured women academics at various career stages, spanning from lecturer to associate professor, regardless of holding permanent or contract positions. The fellowship, which spans between one and two years, offers financial backing for research, leadership enhancement, conference participation, and travel. Applicants are encouraged to disclose any concurrent grant awards they may hold from other sources. Fellows are expected to fulfil specific obligations, such as submitting six-monthly progress reports in June and November, attending quarterly meetings, engaging in mentorship activities, meeting publication targets, and submitting grant proposals. Application prerequisites include a comprehensive curriculum vitae (CV), a motivational statement, a detailed budget, career advancement objectives, and, if applicable, details regarding concurrent grants. If a fellow is applying for buy-out time, a letter endorsing her application from the head of school is required; no other referral letters are required.

After the application process, fellows attend an induction workshop, which includes introducing the fellows to the FALF Board, providing background on the FALF initiative, explaining how to manage the FALF grant, discussing procurement, research, leadership, academic citizenship, and introducing FALF's approach to social support. Fellows are grouped into pods, a network for peer-to-peer mentorship and collaborative research.

Simultaneously, there is a mandatory 360-degree leadership assessment led by Dr Natasha Winkler-Titus, an industrial psychologist and a founder of the company, Signifyer. Fellows attend the briefing session, where Winkler-Titus explains the process, and fellows submit an online form with the names of their seniors and peers who will provide feedback on their behalf. Winkler-Titus combines the feedback of the leadership assessment tool so that fellows can learn how their peers and seniors perceive them as leaders in their respective spaces. This leadership tool is still in development and has not yet been evaluated. It will be considered in the next phase of the study.

The fellows refer to the FALF as a community and family; they call it the 'spirit of the FALF', which is what brings fellows with shared and similar struggles together in a unique way. Fellows have found a home where they feel that they belong. Numerous fellows indicated that the FALF had served as a vehicle to remind them that they had reached their leadership potential through the support they received. Fellows alluded to Professor Nkomo's presentations at induction, emphasising that leadership starts with the self, mastering the phenomenon of being a leader of the self, being led as a follower, and being able to lead others. Consequently, the FALF emerges as an initiative collaborating with tertiary institution executives to support the development of marginalised groups of females and prepare them for leadership positions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The intersectionality feminist framework is a critical lens that examines how various social categories, such as gender, race, age, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and ability, intersect and interact to shape individuals' experiences of oppression and privilege. This framework challenges simplistic understandings of social inequality by recognising that people's identities and experiences are shaped by multiple interconnected factors.[18] Intersectionality highlights the complexity and nuance of lived experiences, emphasising the importance of considering intersecting axes of identity in analysing and addressing systemic inequalities. By acknowledging the intersecting nature of power dynamics, intersectional feminism provides a comprehensive understanding of social justice issues and informs inclusive approaches to advocacy and activism.[19]

This study adopts an intersectionality feminist framework, emphasising that women do not universally experience gender inequality and oppression in standardised or similar ways. Social structures influence and interact with each other in intricate ways, and explicitly recognise that women face oppression and discrimination that are shaped by multiple factors.[20] This perspective moves beyond perceiving gender inequality through a singular lens, instead framing it as a complex interaction among different societal structures.

For instance, the experiences of females within the academic sphere may significantly differ due to the intersectionality of race and gender. This nuanced understanding is crucial for recognising the unique challenges and disparities faced by individuals with intersecting identities. In light of this, addressing issues related to gender inequality requires targeted interventions that consider the distinct circumstances of various subgroups. A one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient when attempting to dismantle systemic barriers.

Therefore, interventions should be tailored to consider the multifaceted nature of oppression, ensuring that the unique challenges faced by different groups of women are effectively addressed. By acknowledging and understanding the complexities arising from intersecting social structures, this study aimed to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable approach to tackling gender inequality.

The intersectionality feminist framework not only acknowledges the complexity of individuals' experiences but also underscores the importance of centring marginalised voices in social justice efforts. By recognising the intersecting axes of identity that shape individuals' lived realities, this framework emphasises the need to prioritise the perspectives and concerns of those who are most marginalised within society. This approach not only leads to a deeper understanding of systemic inequalities but also informs increasingly effective strategies for advocacy and activism.

Moreover, by amplifying the voices of marginalised communities, intersectional feminism fosters greater inclusivity and empowers individuals to participate actively in the pursuit of social change. Ultimately, embracing intersectionality not only enhances an understanding of social justice issues but also provides guidance towards more equitable and inclusive solutions.

The FALF, cognisant of persistent disparities faced by women in higher education, particularly in management and leadership roles, employs an intersectionality lens to delve deeper into these inequities. It becomes evident that while all women encounter barriers in academia, the extent of disadvantage varies across different racial groups. For example, data from this study revealed that African and Coloured women are disproportionately underrepresented in academic leadership positions compared to their White and Indian counterparts. Moreover, within these racial groups, African and Coloured women often face additional layers of discrimination and marginalisation. By acknowledging these intersecting forms of disadvantage, the FALF recognises that African and Coloured female fellows may have distinct experiences, unique social challenges, and specific needs that require tailored support and intervention. Through its intersectional approach, the FALF endeavours to address these disparities by providing culturally sensitive mentorship, training, and resources that empower all women to overcome systemic barriers and thrive in leadership roles within academia.

Dlamini emphasises the detrimental impact when majority groups or subgroups perpetually constitute a minority in leadership positions and knowledge production. Such a scenario perpetuates stereotypes suggesting that leadership and knowledge production belong exclusively to minority groups, fostering a culture of mediocrity that impedes societal prosperity. Dlamini highlights the strength inherent in numbers and the diversity of ideas, particularly when an institution's culture embraces diversity. This study is crucial because African and Coloured female leaders have the potential to be agents of change, not merely a vulnerable group, but a group exhibiting resilience in managing daily challenges. The FALF serves as an intersectional and transformational vehicle for the leadership and professional development of African and Coloured females at Wits.

3. FELLOW'S PROFILE

The FALF has had three cohorts, as seen in Figure 3.1, each contributing to the program's commitment to empowering female leaders in academia.

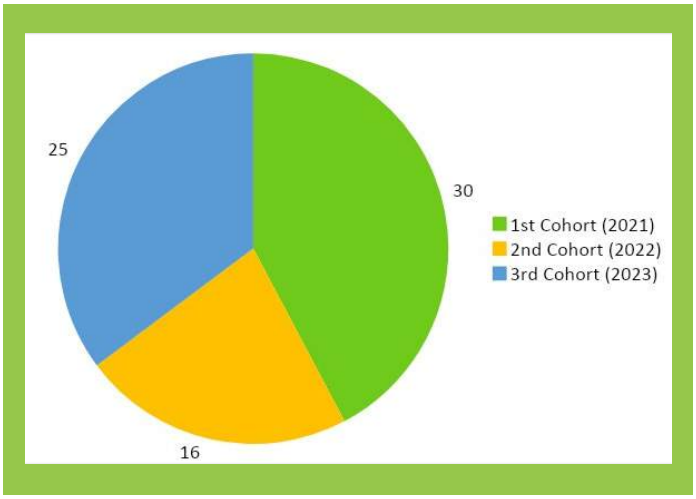

FIGURE 3.1: NUMBER OF FELLOWS PER COHORT [21]

The inaugural 2021 cohort comprised 30 fellows, marking the beginning of an impactful journey for aspiring academic leaders. The subsequent 2022 cohort included 16 fellows and the program demonstrated its commitment to fostering diversity and inclusion by welcoming the first two postdoctoral researchers. As the FALF continued to evolve, the 2023 cohort, consisting of 25 fellows, aims to cultivate a community of female leaders ready to contribute to their respective academic fields.

Table 3.1 shows the number of fellows per faculty at Wits.

TABLE 3.1: NUMBER OF FELLOWS PER WITS FACULTY, 2021-2023 [22]

Wits Faculties	Fellows
Humanities	18
Science	7
Health Sciences	33
Commerce, Law, & Management	7
Engineering and the Built Environment	6
TOTAL	**71**

The FALF has diverse groups of fellows that vary by age, faculty, and academic ranks, and total 71.[23] Delving into the distribution across faculties, the study reports 18 fellows from humanities, seven fellows from science, and a significant 33 fellows from health sciences. Commerce, law and management stands at seven fellows, and engineering, built environment contributes six fellows. This shows the rich diversity and collective strength of the FALF community, which aims to foster female academic leadership across various academic disciplines.

4. GENDER AND RACIAL INEQUALITY AS JUSTIFICATION FOR THE FALF

Within South Africa, the intersectionality of race and gender adds complexity to the experiences of women in leadership roles within higher education.

4.1 RACE AND GENDER RESEARCH

Research has consistently highlighted the underrepresentation of African and Coloured females in leadership positions within academia, particularly in comparison to other racial groups such as Whites and Indians.[24] It has stressed the influence of cultural and systemic factors on the representation of women, especially those from marginalised racial backgrounds, in leadership positions. Senior leadership positions in South African higher education institutions have a disproportionate representation of African and Coloured females compared to their White and Indian counterparts. Systemic challenges and institutional barriers hinder the career advancement of women, and nuanced approaches to address the challenges faced by women from marginalised racial backgrounds are required.[25] Female deans in South African universities have unique challenges and barriers.[26]

Examining the gendered aspects of leadership development in South African higher education, highlighted the lack of representation of African and Coloured females in academic leadership positions, such as deans, heads of departments, and professors. The prerequisite to obtaining these academic leadership positions often is full or associate professorship. Being a professor increases the likelihood of advancement into leadership positions. Targeted interventions and support programs are thus needed to address the underrepresentation of women, particularly those from marginalised racial groups, in academic leadership roles.[27] The underrepresentation of African and Coloured females in academic leadership positions in South Africa highlights the systemic inequalities and barriers that exist within the higher education sector. These are valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by women in leadership roles within South African universities.

Before the FALF was founded, a comprehensive desktop study was conducted, which informed the initiative and served as justification for its establishment. The desktop study revealed a significant racial and gender gap in female academic leadership. The data in Figure 4.1 illustrates significant disparities in the representation of different racial and gender groups across various academic ranks at Wits.

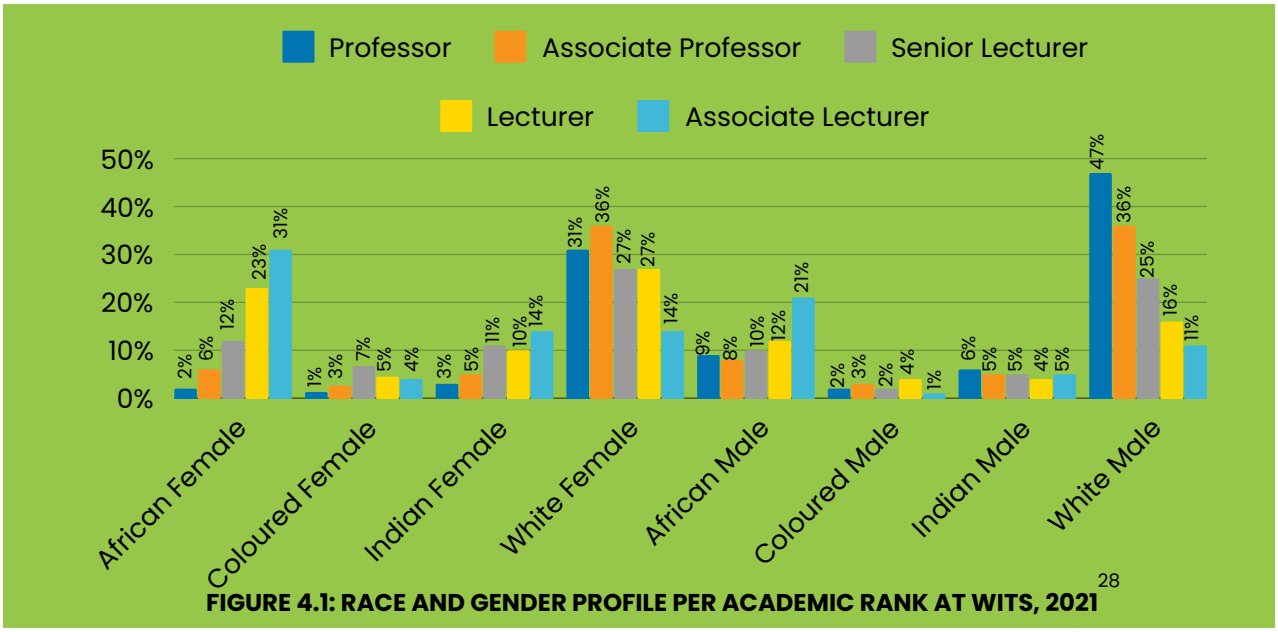

FIGURE 4.1: RACE AND GENDER PROFILE PER ACADEMIC RANK AT WITS, 2021[28]

At the highest academic rank of professor, White males demonstrate the highest representation. Following them are African males, although their representation is notably lower. In contrast, females, particularly African and Coloured females, exhibit lower representation compared to males within this rank. White females have a higher representation of 31 % at professor level and this is disproportionate to 2% at professor level for African females.

Moving to the associate professor rank, a similar trend emerges, with White males occupying most positions, followed by African males. African and Coloured females show lower representation compared to males, with African females marginally outpacing Coloured females in this rank. When compared to a mere 6% representation at associate professor level for African females, white females have better representation at 36% thereby increasing their prospects for promotion within the academic ranks.

The senior lecturer rank reflects a dominance of White females and males, with, particularly Africa and Coloured females having marginally higher representation compared to their male counterparts.

At the lecturer rank, White and African females dominate. African females have double the numbers of their male counterparts and Coloured females are marginally more than Coloured males.

In the associate lecturer rank, African females and males lead in representation, with Coloured females having a larger representation than their male counterparts do, although percentages are low.

Overall, the data highlights a consistent trend of higher representation of White males and females in the higher academic ranks at Wits, while African males and females are more highly represented at the lower academic ranks. Coloured males and females are the least represented across all academic ranks. Addressing these disparities necessitates comprehensive strategies aimed at promoting gender and racial diversity, equity, and inclusion across all academic ranks.

The distribution of academic positions at Wits among African and Coloured females in Figures 4.2 and 4.3 respectively compares data from 2012 and 2021.

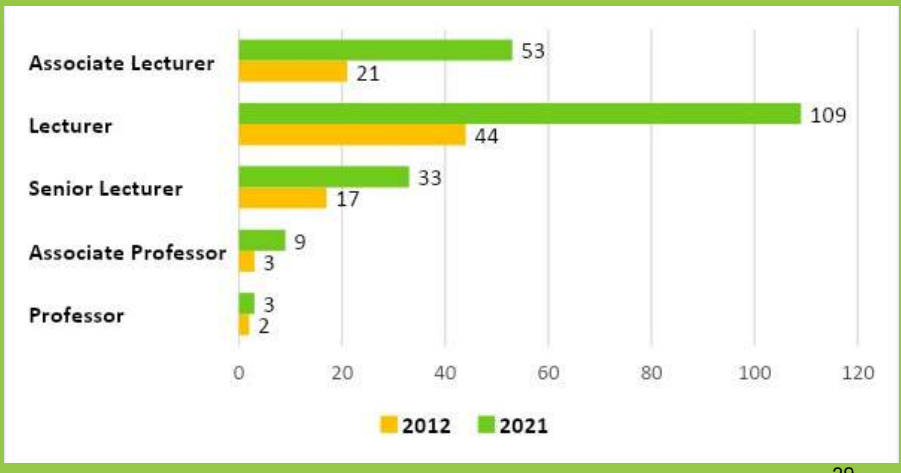

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FIGURE 4.2: AFRICAN FEMALES PER ACADEMIC RANK, 2012 AND 2021

FIGURE 4.3: COLOURED FEMALES PER ACADEMIC RANK, 2012 AND 2021 [30]

The data are categorised into five ranks: professor, associate professor, senior lecturer, lecturer, and associate lecturer. Between 2012 and 2021, there are noticeable variations in the number of faculty members across these positions for both ethnic groups. For African females, the data indicates a total count of 87 academics in 2012, which increases to 207 by 2021.

These trends highlight both progress and disparities within the Wits University academic landscape. While there is a positive trajectory in the overall representation of female faculty members, particularly among African academics, disparities persist, especially for Coloured females. Further analysis could explore the factors contributing to these disparities, such as recruitment practices, promotion policies, and support structures for career advancement. Addressing these disparities is essential for fostering inclusivity and ensuring equitable opportunities for all female academics within Wits.

Figure 4.4 shows the progression of female academics at Wits from 2021 to 2023.

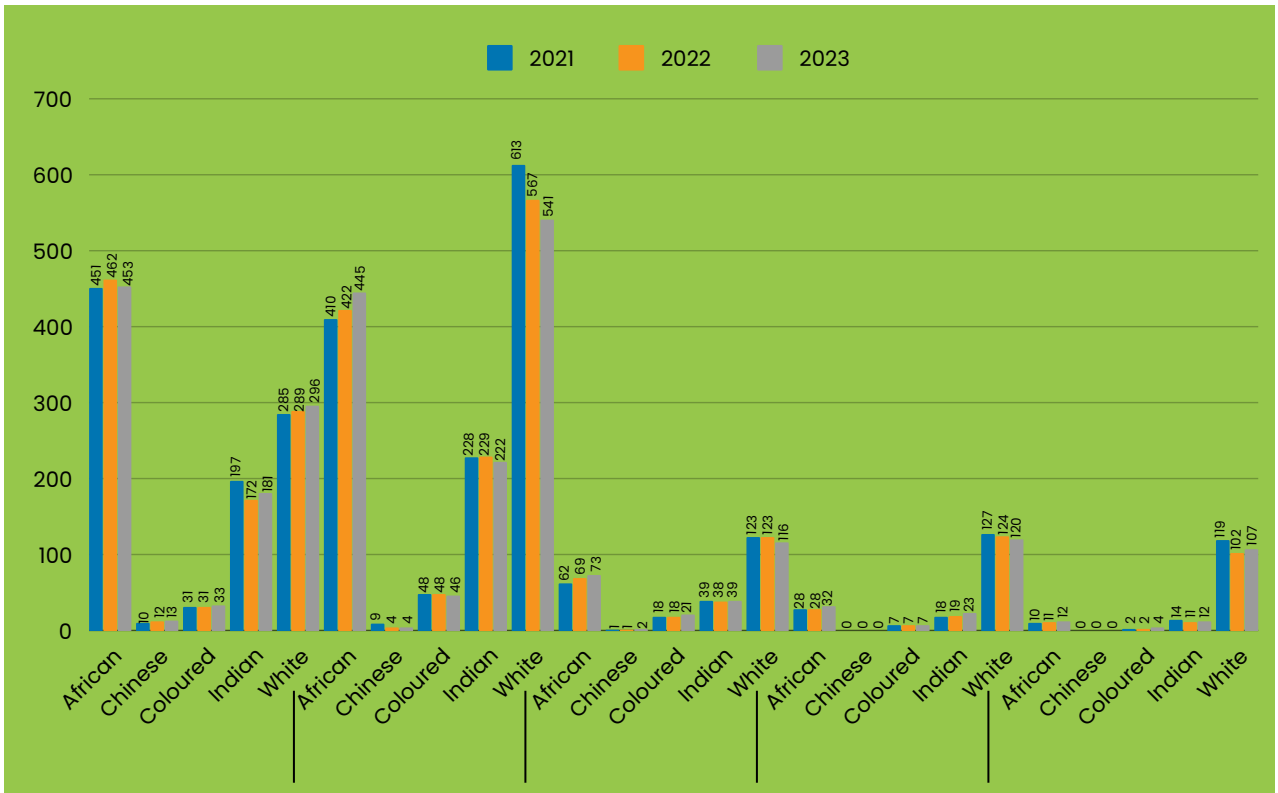


FIGURE 4.4: PROGRESSION OF FEMALE ACADEMICS AT WITS, 2021-2023[31]

Data indicates that among associate lecturers, more African females are present, followed by White females. In the lecturer position, White females lead, followed by African females, Indian, Coloured, and then Chinese. For senior lecturers, Whites are in the majority, followed by Africans, Indians, Coloured, and Chinese. In the associate professor role, more White females hold positions than do other racial groups. Similarly, in the professor role, Whites have more representation than other races.

Considering the population demographics of African females, White females, Indians, Coloured, and Chinese, African females constitute the majority, with smaller populations for Chinese and Indians. However, across all ranks, they are represented, despite their smaller population sizes. These statistics underline the justification for the FALF, which aims to develop a pipeline of female academics, specifically African and Coloured females.

4.2 GENDER EQUALITY INITIATIVES

In addition to the FALF at Wits, several other universities globally have implemented initiatives to address gender disparities in academic leadership roles. For example, institutions in the United States, such as Harvard University's Women and Public Policy Program and the University of Michigan's ADVANCE Program, have developed comprehensive initiatives to support the advancement of women in academia. Similarly, the Athena SWAN programme in the UK provides strategies for promoting gender equality in the UK and Australia. These programs offer mentorship, networking opportunities, leadership training, and resources to address the unique challenges faced by women in academic settings.[32] However, these programs do not incorporate the intersectionality lens.

Similarly, universities in the United Kingdom, like the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, have established initiatives aimed at promoting gender diversity in leadership positions. These programs focus on enhancing the representation of women in senior academic roles through targeted recruitment efforts, leadership development programs, and advocacy for gender-inclusive policies and practices.[33]

In Australia, institutions such as the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney have implemented initiatives to support women's career progression in academia. These initiatives offer mentorship programs, professional development workshops, and networking events tailored to the needs of female academics.[34]

At Wits, the transformation office has executed programs for over a decade though these have not fully manifested to African females. Furthermore, in Africa, beyond Wits, universities in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa have launched initiatives to address gender disparities in academic leadership. These initiatives often involve partnerships with international organisations and funding agencies to support research, training, and capacity-building activities aimed at advancing women's representation in senior academic positions.[25]

By highlighting these diverse initiatives, it becomes evident that universities worldwide are recognising the importance of fostering gender diversity in academic leadership and are actively working to create more inclusive and equitable environments for women in academia.

Through collaborative efforts and shared best practices, these initiatives contribute to systemic change and pave the way for a more diverse and representative leadership landscape in higher education. It is also imperative to apply an intersectional lens to fully appreciate the difference between equity and inequality to matters pertaining to gender and race. With countries like South Africa having a history of oppression, the intersectional lens cannot be omitted.

4.3 THE CHALLENGE OF BEING FEMALE IN ACADEMIA

Career setbacks related to natural life events that require absence from work, such as maternity leave, perpetuate the enduring gender inequalities present in many workplaces. To address this issue, a comprehensive re-evaluation of policies and cultural norms is essential.[36] For instance, some fellows revealed instances where their male colleagues were promoted during their maternity leave, signalling a punitive stance towards childbirth. These delays not only hindered the career progression of female academics but also perpetuated the enduring gender inequalities present in many workplaces.[37]

Moreover, similar challenges have been documented in universities worldwide. Research conducted at institutions such as Harvard University and the University of Oxford has highlighted the lack of supportive policies and practices for faculty members taking maternity leave, leading to career setbacks and disparities in promotion opportunities.[38] Additionally, studies from universities in Australia and Canada have revealed the detrimental impact of maternity leave on female academics' research productivity and professional development, further exacerbating gender inequalities in academia.[39] This emphasises the need for systemic changes in higher education institutions to address the structural barriers faced by women balancing caregiving responsibilities with academic careers.

Additionally, within the scope of this research, similar challenges related to maternity leave were identified among the fellows. According to the findings, 90% of the fellows indicated that they experienced career delays due to maternity leave, highlighting the pervasive nature of this issue within the academic sector. Furthermore, the study revealed instances where male counterparts' colleagues were continuously promoted during the females' fellows' maternity leave, signalling a punitive stance towards childbirth and exacerbating the challenges faced by mothers in balancing their caregiving responsibilities with career advancement. These narratives shed light on the complex dynamics at play and underscore the need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of policies and cultural norms to address gender disparities in academia.[40]

In response to these findings, recommendations have been made for universities, as exemplified in South Africa, to introduce day care and aftercare facilities on campus for academic staff, providing mothers with the option to bring their children to work. This proactive step not only alleviates stress for mothers worrying about their infants' well-being, but also signifies a supportive structure within higher learning institutions, acknowledging that the birth of a child should not pose a hindrance but rather warrant additional support and understanding. By implementing such initiatives, universities can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive work environment for women, fostering an environment where female academics can thrive both personally and professionally.[41]

5. METHODS

5.1 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study adopted a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods.

5.2 DATA COLLECTION

- **Qualitative component:** In-depth interviews were conducted with fellows to gain insights into their experiences. Additionally, a case study was developed to explore the role and activities of the FALF at Wits, focusing on engagement with the fellows.
- **Quantitative component:** Baseline data, encompassing degrees held, academic rank, research profile, and leadership skills, were collected and compared with the gains made over the fellowship period, Surveys were also administered to augment the quantitative dataset.

5.3 POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population of 71 fellows, from 2021, 2022, and 2023 cohorts, was used for the quantitative portion of the study. Reports were drawn and surveys undertaken. Purposive sampling was employed, focusing on fellows affiliated with or actively involved in the FALF. The fellows were female academics aged between 25-50 years old.

A sample of 46 fellows, from the 2021, 2022, and 2023 cohorts, was used for the qualitative data collection. This number was due to constraints on participant availability for in-depth interviews.

5.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis for this study involved both qualitative and quantitative approaches, combining thematic analysis of qualitative data with statistical analysis of quantitative data.

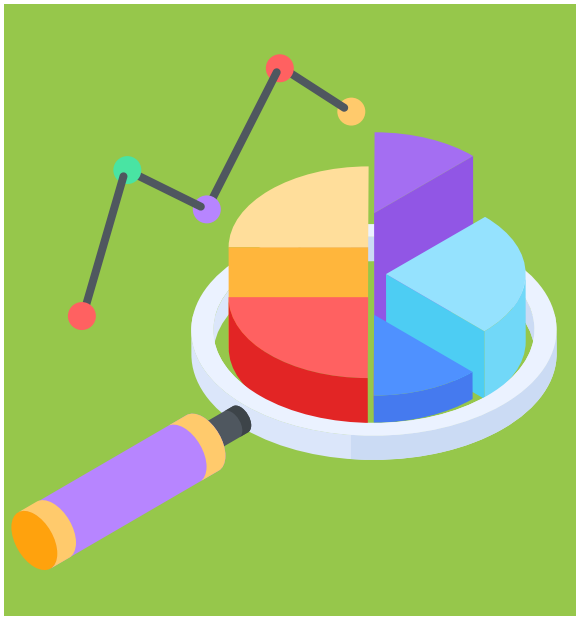
5.4.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

Data from interviews and case studies underwent thematic analysis to identify patterns, recurring themes, and insights relevant to the research objectives. The process involved:

- Familiarisation with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts and case study materials.
- Coding of data to identify meaningful units of information related to the research questions.
- Collating codes into potential themes and grouping similar codes together.
- Reviewing and refining themes to ensure that they accurately reflected the data.
- Defining and naming themes and generating clear descriptions.
- Writing up the findings and providing illustrative quotes and examples to support each theme.

5.4.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the FALF records, such as fellows' number of publications, conferences attended, deliverables committed to, and number of students supervised, were subjected to appropriate statistical analysis methods to ascertain relationships and trends.



One specific analysis conducted included Comparative analysis to compare groups or cohorts based on specific characteristics or outcomes, such as research outputs, student supervision, motivation to be in the program, deliverables, academic rank, and promotions.

5.4.3 Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

Following the separate analyses of qualitative and quantitative data, the emergent themes from qualitative interviews were supported and enriched by the statistical findings from the FALF records and surveys. This integration allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon, capturing both the nuanced experiences of fellows and the quantitative evidence of program impact. Findings were triangulated with literature to provide a holistic interpretation and to enhance the validity and reliability of the study results.

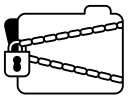
By employing both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods, this study aimed to provide a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the research topic, leveraging the strengths of each approach to generate robust findings and meaningful insights.

5.5 ETHICS CONSIDERATION

The PIs was granted permission from the Wits Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Non-Medical), protocol number H23/05/10.[42] Further ethics considerations included:

- **Consensual participation:** Written consent was obtained from all fellows to participate in the study, emphasising voluntary participation. Fellows were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

- **No compensation for the study:** Fellows were informed that there was no compensation for participation in the study.



- **Anonymity and confidentiality:** Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed during the write-up phase of the study, with data stored securely on a password-protected laptop and the fellows comments anonymised when quoting from their qualitative inputs.

- **Achieving rigour in a qualitative study:** The PIs ensured trust and confidence in the study findings through consistent methods, sharing key findings with fellows, attaching appendices, and providing direct quotes in the final study. Dependability was maintained through clear details on the study conduct, and confirmability and reflection were achieved by recording reflections and seeking clarification during interviews.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 PROGRAMME IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PROFILE

In this section the impact of the FALF on fellows' research publications, student supervision, international and local collaborations, and promotions are depicted.

6.1.1 Research Publications

The FALF plays a pivotal role in advancing the careers of its academics. Fellows are integral to Wits' academic community, and their research outputs contribute to the Wits University' overall scholarly endeavours.

One of the primary strategic pillars of the FALF is to enhance research portfolios, particularly through the amplification of research publications. This strategic focus underscores the program's commitment to diversifying knowledge producers and fostering leadership among female academics. It recognises that increasing research outputs, especially through publications, is fundamental not only for academic inquiry but also for professional growth and recognition.

It is important to note that this research comprises the FALF's initial phase of reporting, which will continue annually. Throughout this longitudinal study unfolding until 2030, all the FALF research outputs metrics will be comprehensively measured, providing insights into the program's impact on scholarly productivity and academic advancement.

Against this backdrop, the details of the 2022 report released by Wits provide a comprehensive overview of research activities.[43] The report features the significant global impact of Wits academics through their publications, revealing compelling statistics, including the number of citations, which highlight the Wits' commitment to scholarly excellence. These metrics provide valuable insights into the quality and influence of scholarly work.

The report, celebrating Wits' centenary, highlighted the significant global impact of its academics' publications. Wits authors contributed 4 073 items indexed by the Clarivate Web of Science, receiving 20 987 citations, averaging 5.15 citations per publication. Moreover, the broader Scopus index documented 4 611 publications by Wits authors.[44] A comparison with the exceptional performance of 2021, influenced in part by the extended time for writing during the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, revealed a slight 4.7% decrease in Web of Science journal articles. However, this decline could be attributed to shifting publication trends rather than reduced productivity, as evidenced by a 5% growth in journal articles (3 467 articles) using the Scopus index.[45] There is an upward trend of journal articles published by Wits authors in the Scopus index over time, with a linear regression indicating an average growth of 196 journal articles per year over an 11-year period, as indicated in Figure 6.1.[46]

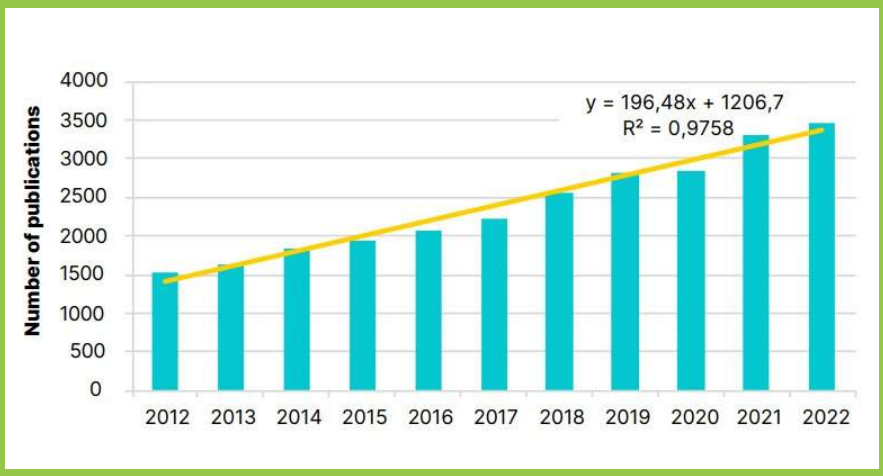


FIGURE 6.1: WITS AUTHORED JOURNAL ARTICLES RECORDED IN SCOPUS INDEX[47]

These publication numbers are reflected in the annual submission of research output units to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). This counting method relies on fractional author counts. In 2022, Wits submitted 2 274 units, with an expected outcome of 2 207 approved units of research, given the typical conversion success rate of 96.7% for submissions into approved units. Another crucial aspect highlighted is the quality of publications. As Wits strives for excellence in all its endeavours, the increase in publication numbers should not compromise quality but rather seek enhancement.[48]

A measure of quality involves a closer analysis of the journals where Wits authors publish. Wits requires academics to publish in Scopus accredited journals and this adds higher weighting when applying for promotions. The Web of Science categorises journals into four quartiles based on their average citations over the last five years, with Quartile 1 representing the most impactful journals. Despite consistent growth, the percentage of Wits-authored publications in Quartile 1 journals remained steady at 41%. Quartile 2 journals saw a 5% increase in 2022, while Quartiles 3 and 4 experienced a decline. Overall, these trends suggest a satisfactory outcome.[49] Figure 6.2 outlines the Wits authored journal articles for all Wits academics per journal quartile:

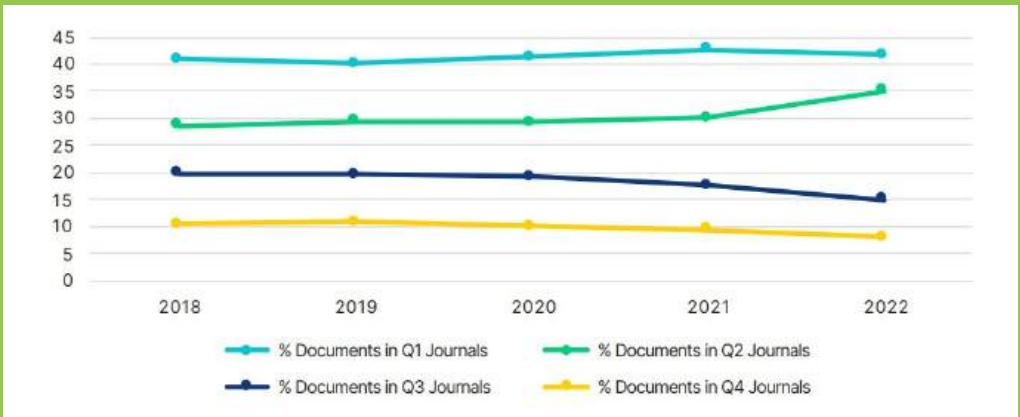


FIGURE 6.2 OUTLINES THE WITS AUTHORED JOURNAL ARTICLES FOR ALL WITS ACADEMICS PER JOURNAL QUARTILE, 2018-2022 [50]

As FALF fellows are Wits academics, their research outputs are part of Wits' overall research outputs. Figure 6.3 on the other hand zones in on the specific publication quantities by FALF fellows over 3 cohorts. The first strategic pillar of the FALF is to diversify knowledge producers and advance research portfolios through the increase of research publications, as this is a key consideration during the promotion process where academics move from one academic rank to the next. The status of research publications for each respective FALF cohort is illustrated in Figure 6.3. The deliverables of each cohort are influenced by the number of fellows in a given year and their specific commitments. Therefore, the table below is not intended to suggest that one cohort outperformed the other; rather, its purpose is to document each cohort's achievements.

FIGURE 6.3: NUMBER OF RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS PER COHORT [51]

The 2021 cohort had 30 fellows, the majority of whom committed to producing two articles as their research outputs. However, it is worth noting that some researchers published more than two articles, while others were still awaiting peer-review feedback from journals. The 2022 cohort comprised 16 fellows who had 30 research outputs published, with a commitment to producing 40 papers. During the first phase of this study, some fellows were still awaiting feedback on their manuscripts. Within this cohort, some fellows committed to producing two or three research articles, while others exceeded this number of publications. The 2023 cohort of 25 fellows are in varying stages of publication. However, our target was two articles per fellow.

In the ever-evolving landscape of academia, the significance of increasing research outputs, particularly through publications, cannot be overstated. Research is not only a cornerstone of academic inquiry but also a key driver for professional growth and recognition. As established, for academics seeking career advancement and promotions, the quantity and quality of their research outputs, including publications, play a pivotal role in establishing their expertise and impact within their respective fields. Research publication records are often used as a quantitative metric to assess an academic's contributions to the scholarly community. As academics accumulate a robust portfolio of publications, it not only demonstrates a commitment to advancing knowledge but also enhances their visibility and reputation in the academic sphere. This, in turn, becomes a crucial factor in evaluations for promotions and tenure.

Recognising the paramount importance of research outputs in the academic journey, the FALF actively supports its fellows to increase their publications. The program acknowledges that fostering female leadership in academia requires not only empowering individuals with knowledge and skills but also providing tangible support for their scholarly endeavours.

The FALF invests in its fellows' professional development by offering resources, mentorship, and opportunities that facilitate the production of high-quality research outputs. Whether through workshops, collaborative initiatives, or targeted funding, the program is committed to creating an environment where fellows can thrive in their research pursuits; by doing so, the FALF not only contributes to the academic success of its fellows but also reinforces the broader mission of increasing diversity and representation in leadership roles within academia.

The relationship between research outputs, particularly publications, and career advancement is symbiotic. As scholars strive to expand the frontiers of knowledge, the recognition and support they receive for their contributions propel them forward in their academic careers. The FALF stands as a testament to the understanding that fostering a new generation of female leaders involves empowering them not only with knowledge but also with the means to share and disseminate that knowledge through impactful research publications.

Wits, as a research-intensive institution, expects all academic staff to balance research, teaching, and service responsibilities. This entails maintaining a level of research activity that includes publishing, securing external funding, and supervising postgraduate students. While these expectations can be demanding alongside teaching and service commitments, Wits offers robust support mechanisms. The Research Office, Wits Enterprise, Wits Health Consortium, and the library collaborate to provide varied administrative support. These encompass ensuring research integrity, offering legal advice, facilitating funding applications, aiding in proposal writing and budgeting, guiding intellectual property matters, assisting with human resource management, managing grant finances, and tailoring library services to researchers' needs.

In addition to Wits' support to its academics, the FALF also provide additional financial and social support to fellows publishing in the various journals within quartile 1, quartile 2, quartile 3, and quartile 4. Figure 6.4 illustrates the distribution of publications among fellows from the 2021 and 2022 cohorts.

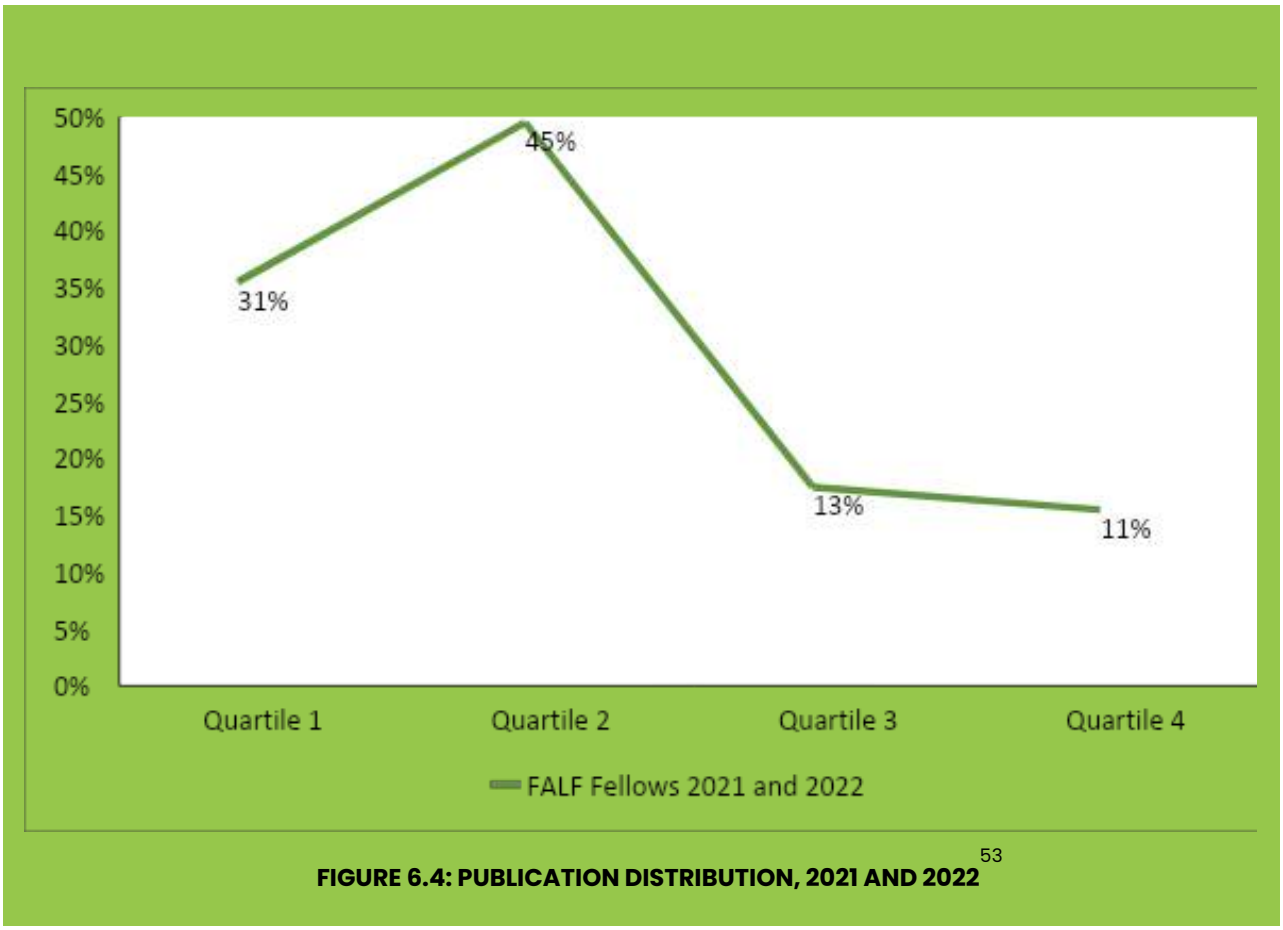


FIGURE 6.4: PUBLICATION DISTRIBUTION, 2021 AND 2022[53]

Out of a total of 90 publications, comprising 60 publications from the 2021 cohort and 30 publications from the 2022 cohort, the distribution across quartiles is as follows: 31% in quartile 1, 45% in quartile 2, 13% in quartile 3, and 11% in quartile 4. This distribution aligns with the findings of the Wits research report, which indicates that there was a steady concentration of publications in quartile 1, with a slight increase in quartile 2, and a decrease in scholars publishing in quartiles 3 and 4.[54]

Some fellows highlighted how they were struggling to publish because they felt like there was no support and that they did not have sufficient information about developing their careers. This quote illustrates an overall sentiment of the fellows regarding publications and the assistance received from the FALF:

> *I was new to the school, a young scholar with little understanding of career development. In those initial years, I found myself running around, attempting to please everyone. I struggled to publish anything for three years until I discovered the FALF. Applying for teaching buyouts, attending conferences, and engaging in leadership opportunities allowed me to take dedicated time for writing. This resulted in the publication of four peer-reviewed articles in a high-impact journal. Through international conferences facilitated by the FALF, I formed collaborations, and I am currently working with a distinguished professor from abroad. Enrolling in a leadership course was transformative; I initially did not see myself as a leader, but now, I am pleased to have a clear trajectory for my career development and leadership.*
>
> **~ 2022 FELLOW**

One fellow was promoted after her tenure with the FALF and currently serves as a head of department, she expressed her admiration for the FALF and the fellows:

> *In my department, we have three fellows, and it is truly amazing how their enhanced profiles contribute to achieving our departmental strategy of increasing publications and advancing the university's transformation agenda. The positive impact ripples across the entire institution, showcasing the broader benefits of programs like the FALF.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

The significance of publication outputs extends far beyond individual career development. As fellows progress in their scholarly pursuits and contribute to the academic landscape, their publications not only enhance their personal academic profiles but also significantly contribute to the departmental, school, faculty, and university records of scholarly achievements. The growth and development of the fellows, catalysed by their research outputs, become integral components of Wits' academic legacy.

The FALF recognises that the impact of its fellows' publications extends beyond the institutional boundaries. The collective growth of these scholars elevates the academic standing of the entire department, enriches the faculty's research portfolio, and enhances the overall scholarly reputation of Wits. The dissemination of knowledge generated by the fellows contributes to Wits' intellectual capital and reinforces its position as a hub of academic excellence.

Importantly, the benefits are not confined to Wits alone; they extend to the broader community, the country, and the global academic arena. The FALF's commitment to fostering female leadership in academia aligns with a broader vision of contributing to the advancement of knowledge and societal progress. The growth and development of the fellows, as evidenced by their publications, serve as beacons of inspiration and catalysts for positive change.

The study affirms that local interventions, providing holistic support beyond financial assistance, are essential to address the racial and gender gaps in leadership within higher education institutions. The FALF emerged as a significant local intervention committed to reducing racial and gender disparities by empowering female academic leaders through the increase in research publications that can increase the fellows' possibilities for promotion. It is evident that a collaborative nexus structure is necessary to tackle these gaps in higher learning institutions effectively. Various entities, including state institutions, higher learning institutions, non-profits like the FALF, and other relevant interventions, should work in concert to achieve the common objective.[55]

6.1.2 Student Supervision

Student supervision is an integral part of academic promotion, and Table 6.1 shows that the fellows supervised a high number of students in 2021 and 2022. Considering that the 2022 cohort had 16 fellows and had been part of the FALF for a shorter time, indicates a substantial level of involvement. The supervision performance of the 2021 cohort is higher given its size and starting date.

TABLE 6.1: STUDENT SUPERVISION[56]

Cohort	Degree	Total	Graduated	In Progress
2021	PhD	23	19	4
	Masters	136	96	40
	Hons	60	45	15
2022	PhD	16	2	14
	Masters	44	7	37
	Hons	24	14	10

In the 2022 cohort, 16 PhD students were enrolled in supervision, with two having successfully graduated and 14 currently in progress. Additionally, 44 master's degree students were under supervision, out of which seven have completed their degrees while 37 are still pursuing their studies. Furthermore, 24 honours students were supervised, with 14 having graduated and 10 still working towards their degrees.

For the 2021 cohort, there were 23 PhD students under supervision, out of which 19 have already graduated and four are still in progress. The number of master's degree students was significantly higher, with 136 students supervised. Among them, 96 have completed their degrees, while 40 are currently in progress. Finally, 60 honours students were supervised, with 45 having successfully graduated and 15 still in the process of completing their degrees.

Student supervision within each cohort should not be interpreted as an indicator of one cohort performing better or worse than another based on increases or decreases. All cohort achievements are documented according to their committed deliverables. In the next phase, these factors will be explored when comparing cohorts.

A sentiment expressed by one of the fellows is representative of all cohorts:

> *Student supervision is the cornerstone of academic mentorship, fostering growth not only in the mentees but also in the mentors themselves. The opportunity to guide aspiring scholars through their educational journey is both a privilegeaand a responsibility. With the support of the FALF's funds, I've been able to expand my supervision capacity, nurturing a diverse cohort of students and contributing to the future of academia.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

Interviews with the fellows indicated that they had improved their capacity for supervision. The FALF's provision of financial support has been pivotal in advancing academic mentorship. By enabling fellows to expand their supervision capacities, the FALF not only enriches the educational journey of mentees but also empowers mentors to contribute significantly to the future of academia.

6.1.3 International and Local Collaborations

In 2021, the majority (70%) of fellows primarily attended local conferences about 30% of fellows engaged in international conferences. As of 2023, the trend had altered, revealing that fewer numbers, 20% of the fellows, participated in international conferences. The majority (80%), continue to make significant contributions to local conferences.

It is crucial to acknowledge that these changes are influenced by various factors, including the impact of COVID-19. During the pandemic, there was a notable increase in virtual participation in international conferences, driven by the ease and cost-effectiveness of virtual attendance. However, post-pandemic, the international conference participation rate has decreased to 20%, possibly due to funding issues and the lingering effects of COVID-19 on international travel. The shift from 30% to 20% in international conference participation could be attributed to a variety of factors, including the influence of the pandemic, funding constraints, and changing preferences for virtual versus in-person attendance. Some fellows mentioned they were not prioritising conferences, as their focus was directed towards other endeavours, such as writing books, managing teaching overload, and handling administrative tasks.

Beyond conference participation, a notable 5% of fellows have dedicated time to collaborations in international universities, with two fellows even relocating abroad to pursue their academic careers. This international exposure reflects the commitment of the FALF to fostering a global perspective among its fellows.

Recognising the immense value of international collaboration, the FALF is proactively working towards expanding opportunities for the enriching experiences that come from global interactions. The FALF is in the conceptual stages of establishing partnerships with universities abroad. The aim is to provide fellows with opportunities to spend from two to three months abroad. This initiative aligns with the FALF's overarching goal of not only promoting the academic and professional growth of its fellows but also cultivating a diverse and globally connected network that extends the impact of their research and contributions. As the FALF continues to evolve, the emphasis on international exposure stands as a testament to the program's dedication to shaping the next generation of female academic leaders with a truly global perspective. Wits has longstanding international relationships, and the FALF is exposing more academics from the designated groups to global collaborations and/or strengthening what already existed, which have not only enriched the fellows' research endeavours but also promoted diversity and cross-cultural understanding within academic circles. Fellows actively participate in international conferences, collaborate with scholars worldwide, and engage in various projects with international partners.

The FALF is dedicated to promoting international and national collaborations and ensures that fellows receive sufficient funding for these initiatives. Moreover, the FALF actively encourages local collaborations within institutions in the country, across Africa, and globally, to ensure that fellows progress and flourish in their academic, professional, and leadership journeys. The FALF has initiated support structures aimed at facilitating international collaboration and exposure for fellows. These support mechanisms include providing resources and guidance to assist fellows in establishing international partnerships and securing opportunities for travel abroad. By fostering international collaboration and exposure, the FALF aims to broaden the horizons of fellows, enhance their academic networks, and contribute to their professional development on a global scale, as seen in this quote:

> *I've never had the chance to attend an international conference or collaborate internationally in my academic career. Being part of the FALF, I'm eagerly looking forward to embarking on this journey and exploring opportunities for international collaboration. The FALF's support structures are providing me with the resources and guidance I need to broaden my horizons and connect with peers on a global scale. I believe that these experiences will not only enrich my professional development but also contribute significantly to my growth as an academic leader.*
>
> **~ 2023 FELLOW**

Other fellows shared the same sentiment, for example:

> *Attending international conferences has always seemed out of reach for me due to the expenses involved, from registration fees to travel costs. However, with the support of the FALF and its dedicated travel budget, I am thrilled to have the opportunity to attend for the first time. This funding not only removes financial barriers but also validates the importance of expanding my academic horizons. I am excited to make the most of this opportunity, knowing that it will not only enhance my professional development but also allow me to contribute to the global discourse in my field.*
>
> **~ 2023 FELLOW**

As the findings unfolded, it became evident that the experiences shared by some the fellows resonated deeply with others in the program. For those who had never attended an international conference or engaged in international collaboration, the sentiment of feeling constrained by financial barriers was all too familiar. Many expressed their excitement and gratitude for the opportunity provided by the FALF's support structures, which offered them a pathway to overcome these challenges. Across the cohorts, there was a shared understanding of the significance of international exposure and collaboration in advancing their academic careers. The realisation that the FALF was not only addressing their individual needs but also fostering a sense of collective empowerment was palpable. Fellowships served as a catalyst for transformative change, igniting a collective enthusiasm for embracing new opportunities and expanding their academic horizons.

The narratives of these fellows highlighted the transformative impact of the FALF's initiatives in breaking down barriers and empowering women academics to thrive on a global stage. Through shared experiences and mutual support, the FALF community emerged stronger and more resilient, united in their commitment to driving positive change within academia and beyond.

6.1.4 Promotion

The FALF's impact on career progression extends significantly to promotions, marking a pivotal aspect of the program's success, and fellows have experienced substantial advancements in their professional journeys, including notable promotions up the academic ranks. This achievement attests to the program's effectiveness in not only supporting but also actively propelling the career development of female academics.

Table 6.2 illustrates the noteworthy promotions achieved in 2021 and 2022, highlighting both the percentage distribution and the number of promotions across different academic positions.

TABLE 6.2: FELLOW'S PROMOTIONS, 2021 AND 2022 [57]

Promotion	2021		2022	
	No	%	No	%
Deputy Dean	1	1%	-	-
Head of Department	3	9%		
Associate Professor	2	7%	1	6%
Associate Professor Applications Submitted	-	-	2	13%
Senior Researcher	2	7%	-	
Senior Lecturer	16	54%	6	37%
Lecturer	3	11%	3	19%
No Promotion	3	11%	4	25%
TOTAL	**30**	**100%**	**16**	**100%**

Of particular significance is the upward trajectory observed among fellows who initially joined the fellowship at the lecturer level. Remarkably, 54% of these fellows achieved promotion to senior lecturer in 2021, and 37% in 2022, displaying the program's efficacy in facilitating substantial career growth for early-career academics. This progression aligns with the career aspirations expressed by many fellows in their applications, wherein the majority outlined career development plans with the goal of being promoted to the position of senior lecturer.

Additionally, promotions within the fellowship have been observed across various career stages. For instance, promotions from senior lecturer to associate professor occurred at a rate of 7% in 2021 and 6% in 2022, indicating a steady advancement in academic rank. Similarly, promotions from researcher to senior researcher were observed at a rate of 7% in 2021, highlighting the program's support for research excellence and career advancement in this domain.

Furthermore, promotions to leadership positions within Wits have also been noted. In 2021, one fellow was appointed as Deputy Dean, marking a significant milestone in academic leadership and administrative responsibilities. While the focus has been on successful promotions, it is equally valuable to recognise instances where no promotions occurred, constituting 11% in 2021 and 25% in 2022. This emphasises the nuanced nature of academic journeys and provides valuable insights for further program enhancement to address diverse career trajectories. The words of this fellow were echoed in numerous interviews:

> *I have been on probation for five years, and I have submitted for promotion, but I was advised that I'm not meeting the requirements as yet. While some of my colleagues with fewer research outputs have been promoted. Some of my colleagues started to question the process of promotion in my faculty. We are not alone; in other faculties also, there are colleagues who have been on probation as lecturers for some time now.*
>
> **~ 2022 FELLOW**

Their narratives shed light on the challenges faced and the need for a more streamlined and equitable promotion process within Wits.

On the other hand, two fellows shed light on a different aspect of the challenges surrounding promotions, an issue that resonated with others as either a personal experience or something they had witnessed. These fellows revealed that they were not promoted during their childbearing years, despite multiple attempts to apply for promotion.

Some were told they were not ready because they had just given birth, while others had their promotion applications denied by the Head of School. During maternity leave, their focus naturally shifted towards pregnancy and caring for their newborns, leaving them with limited time for scholarly publishing. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated resilience by catching up after this period, ultimately meeting the promotion requirements and publishing the necessary articles.

A fellow shared a unique perspective on her journey; she recounted being left with one article to fulfil all promotion requirements. Her personal experience included getting married, moving in with her husband, and taking on the role of stepmother to a 13-year-old. Navigating the complexities of motherhood delayed her publication as she focused on settling into her new family. Nevertheless, during the interviews, she finalised the paper, showing her determination and adaptability.

The fellows' narratives also delved into the multifaceted aspects of their well-being and associated challenges. Some expressed being emotionally and mentally well-equipped to meet all requirements, while others shared personal hardships such as the loss of a partner or family member, financial distress, stress, and diminished productivity. The challenges of article rejections were also prevalent, with some fellows engaging in revisions during the interview period. Throughout these challenges, the FALF emerged as a crucial support system, instrumental in assisting fellows with their research outputs.

Several fellows have affirmed the notable increase in their research output, leading to promotions and career development, a primary goal that the FALF strives to achieve. The aim is to ensure better representation of this racial group in higher leadership positions, such as head of school, head of department, faculty deans, and even executive roles such as deputy vice-chancellor or vice-chancellor.. The words of this fellow captured an overall sentiment:

> *I have now been promoted to an associate professor role. The delay in my promotion was attributed to insufficient time to produce more research outputs. Consequently, I proposed a research study funded by the FALF, and took a teaching buyout, enabling me to dedicate time to data collection and writing research outputs. This support played a pivotal role in my promotion. The FALF goes beyond providing a grant; it offers holistic support, including social assistance. Being part of the FALF family is a privilege.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

Additionally, several fellows noted a transformation in their academic contributions. Before joining the FALF, their scholarly works did not find a place in high-impact journals. Joining the FALF marked a pivotal shift, catalysing a positive trajectory in their academic contributions, now prominently featured in high-impact accredited journals. This testament to the FALF's impact underscores the significance of mentorship programs in shaping and elevating academic careers, reflecting positively on Wits' commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive academic environment.

6.2 IMPACT OF THE FALF'S SOCIAL SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Through initiatives like the leadership assessment workshop, the provision of grants for research assistance, and the establishment of a supportive community, the FALF has actively worked towards alleviating the burdens that female academics often face. Through mentorship programs, skill-building sessions, and networking opportunities, the fellowship cultivates a cadre of female leaders who not only excel academically but are also equipped to navigate and redefine the landscape of academic leadership. It is committed to creating a diverse and inclusive academic environment where the talents of women are not merely recognised but celebrated.

The tangible outcomes, such as promotions, successful research endeavours, and the bolstering of academic confidence, underscore the effectiveness of the FALF's social support structures, which include the leadership assessment workshop, support networks within the pods, and the positive effect of academic citizenship, which are presented in this section.

6.2.1 Leadership Assessment Workshop

The FALF believes in self-leadership and self-awareness, important pillars for good leaders, hence the mandatory 360-degree leadership assessment conducted at the inception of the programme. It is facilitated by Dr Natasha Winkler-Titus from Signifier and her team of qualified industrial psychologists and career development coaches with over 10 years' experience. The workshop fosters a reflective exploration of fellows' professional paths and each fellows' assessments are discussed with them along with guidance on identified strengths and weaknesses. Serving as a guiding compass, the workshop empowers fellows to acknowledge their strengths, pinpoint areas for growth, and establish realistic goals for their academic leadership journey.

6.2.2 Pod Peer Groups

The pods serve as a peer-to-peer support network for fellows, comprising a diverse mix of senior and junior members from various disciplines. Over the years, the FALF has refined the structure of the pods to enhance mentorship and collaboration. In 2021, there were six pods with varying numbers of fellows, followed by five pods in 2022, and six in 2023. Recognising the value of smaller groups for fostering meaningful connections and effective planning, the FALF Board opted to maintain this approach. These multidisciplinary groups, exemplified by initiatives like the autism project involving fellows from health sciences and humanities, underscore the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration within Wits.

Each member of a cohort is assigned to a pod, where regular meetings provide mutual support and the chance to work on collaborative projects. This provides a unique space for women to come together, share experiences, and collectively pursue leadership excellence, acknowledging and addressing the specific challenges faced by female academics. Beyond financial assistance, the peer network established through pods offers robust social support, fostering collaboration, mentorship, and a sense of belonging within the FALF community.

This holistic approach not only meets the academic and research needs of female academics, but also empowers them to thrive within the broader academic landscape, amplifying the impact of the FALF in advancing women's representation and success in academia, as illustrated in this quote:

> *Within my pod, we are currently collaborating on a project and have strategically outlined two research outputs stemming from this joint effort. The collaborative environment within the pod has proven instrumental, with one member facilitating an introduction to her international collaborator. This connection has opened up an additional collaborative project for all members involved. The structure provided by the FALF pods not only fosters teamwork but also serves as a catalyst for expanding collaborative opportunities and networks among its fellows.*
>
> **~ 2022 FELLOW**

Fellows emphasised the significant contribution of this social structure to their careers, noting that they no longer face professional challenges in isolation but rather belong to a supportive community known as the FALF (within their pods and between all fellows), as captured in the following quote:

> *We received the FALF Pod Group Award, acknowledging our collective efforts and dedication. This recognition is truly inspiring, along with additional accolades such as the FALF Spirit Award and The FALF Pod Individual Award. The FALF extends its recognition through various other awards, including research awards, leadership awards, and CSI awards, providing a comprehensive acknowledgement of the diverse achievements of the fellows.*
>
> **~ 2022 FELLOW**

FIGURE 6.5 DEPICTS THE RECIPIENTS OF THE FALF AWARDS 2022.

FIGURE 6.5: FALF SYMPOSIUM AND AWARDS, OCTOBER 2022
(FROM LEFT: PROF. PALESA MOTSHABI, DR. DINEO MPANYA, DR. IDA RISENGA, DR. PRUDENCE DITLOPO, DR. THAMA DUBA, AND DR. BUSISIWE MASEKO)

The FALF offers awards to recognise fellows' achievements, encompassing research, leadership, pod group, pod individual, and SCI categories. Criteria for these awards are comprehensive, reflecting various facets of excellence. The research excellence award includes publication in reputable journals, acceptance for publication with attention to journal impact ranking, and submission of peer-reviewed conference proceedings or books. Recognition through competitive research grants, personal awards, or NRF ratings further illustrates research excellence. The leadership award within academia is demonstrated through academic promotion, postgraduate supervision and graduation, participation in postdoctoral fellowships, and involvement in academic committees or societies. Organising conferences or workshops, serving as reviewer for journals or research grants, and engaging in mentoring activities also signify leadership qualities.

The FALF spirit awards (pod individual and group awards) emphasises active participation in pods, effective financial management of awarded grants, and timely submission of quality reports against milestones. Fulfilment of commitments outlined in the FALF grant, such as completing a doctoral degree, and active engagement with identified mentors are crucial aspects. Participation in self-development programs emphasises dedication to personal and professional growth. Beyond academic achievements, fellows are encouraged to contribute to society through the dissemination of research findings and their impact on public policy. Additionally, popularising science through engagement or mentoring of school learners or undergraduate students demonstrates a commitment to social responsibility and community engagement.

6.2.3 Academic Citizenship

Central to the FALF's approach is the emphasis on academic citizenship, a key factor contributing to the well-rounded development of its fellows. Academic citizenship goes beyond conventional research responsibilities, encompassing a broader commitment to the academic community and society. The FALF recognises the multifaceted nature of academic contributions, and by prioritising academic citizenship, it underlines the importance of scholars actively participating in and enriching various aspects of academic life.

As fellows engage with academic citizenship initiatives encouraged by the FALF, they not only enhance their individual profiles, but also become integral contributors to the academic ecosystem. This holistic approach to career development ensures that the impact of the FALF extends beyond traditional research roles. The program's commitment to cultivating well-rounded academics is evident in the success stories of fellows who, propelled by the FALF support, have excelled in their research endeavours, and actively contributed to the broader academic community through leadership, mentorship, and other forms of academic citizenship.
In essence, the FALF's focus on promotions, leadership, production of knowledge, collaborations, and academic citizenship signifies a comprehensive strategy for empowering female academics, fostering an environment where success is measured not only by individual achievements, but also by the positive influence and contributions made to other fellows and the academic landscape.

FALF spearheads and organises the academic citizenship initiative at the FALF. The primary objective of these sessions is to facilitate the exchange of information and provide guidance to fellows, enabling them to enhance their contributions to academic citizenship.

In the 2023 academic citizenship workshop, a significant revelation emerged as many senior academics expressed a prevailing trend of a lack of emphasis on building their academic citizenship beyond the confines of Wits and, notably, beyond the national level. A common feeling is captured in this quote:

> *When I attended the first FALF citizen science workshop, I had never imagined myself as a global leader. My plan was to grow within my institution only. However, an esteemed full professor who is a FALF board director was conducting the workshop [and] took us through the concept of academic citizenship from your institution to provincial, to national, to continental, and to global leader. This workshop gave us tools and guidance on how to further develop ourselves as academic leaders. This workshop made me see academic leadership as a multifaceted and broad phenomenon. When I participated in the inaugural FALF citizen science workshop, my aspirations were primarily centred on personal and institutional growth. The idea of becoming a global leader had not yet taken root in my mind. However, the transformative nature of the workshop, facilitated by a distinguished full professor and FALF board director, reshaped my perspective on academic leadership.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

Other fellows shared similar sentiments:

> *During the workshop, the concept of academic citizenship was unravelled, extending beyond the confines of our individual institutions to broader horizons. The session navigated through the various levels of leadership, from the institutional and provincial to the national, continental, and ultimately, the global stage. This comprehensive exploration provided valuable insights and tools, offering guidance on how to navigate and excel at each level of academic leadership.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

The workshop served as a catalyst, expanding my vision from a local focus to a more global and multifaceted understanding of academic leadership. The deliberate exposure to different echelons of leadership instilled in me a sense of responsibility and possibility. It became evident that academic leadership is not a singular, isolated phenomenon but a complex, interconnected web that spans institutions, regions, and even continents. As a result, the workshop not only equipped me with practical tools for personal development but also broadened my perception of academic leadership as a multifaceted endeavour. It illuminated the pathways to becoming not just a leader within the confines of my institution but a global influencer, emphasising the interconnectedness and shared responsibilities that come with leadership on a broader scale. In essence, the FALF citizen science workshop became a pivotal moment, transforming my outlook on academic leadership and inspiring a journey toward becoming a leader with a global impact.

~ 2022 FELLOW

The exploration of academic citizenship within the FALF community serves as a testament to the organisation's commitment to fostering a global perspective on leadership. Through workshops and initiatives, the FALF equips fellows with practical tools for personal development and inspires a broader vision of academic leadership that transcends institutional boundaries. The acknowledgment of the interconnected web of leadership, spanning from local to global levels, emphasises the shared responsibilities and possibilities inherent in academic citizenship. As fellows continue their journeys, the transformative impact of these experiences illuminates pathways to becoming influential leaders on a global scale, contributing to a vibrant and interconnected academic community.

6.3 CAREER CHALLENGES & CONSTRAINTS

In the landscape of higher education, the strides made towards gender equality are notable, with an increasing number of women contributing to academia. However, numerous challenges and constraints remain. They have been grouped as follows: promotion to leadership roles and probationary periods, mental health issues, departmental politics, heavy workloads, gatekeeping, and work-life conflicts. These are examined in the sub-sections that follow.

6.3.1 Promotion to Leadership Roles and Probationary Periods

The ascent to top administrative and leadership positions within academic institutions remains an intricate challenge for many female professionals. Despite the growing representation of women in various academic roles, the higher echelons of leadership often maintain a marked gender disparity.[58] The limited presence of women in top administrative positions perpetuates a gendered hierarchy, creating an imbalance in decision-making structures. The consequences of this underrepresentation are far-reaching, as diverse perspectives that women can offer are restricted, affecting the overall richness of discussions and policy formulations within the academic setting.

The persistent challenges faced by women aspiring to leadership roles extend beyond mere numbers. The multifaceted nature of gender inequality in higher education encompasses subtle biases, systemic hurdles, and cultural norms that hinder the equitable progression of women into leadership positions. Addressing this issue necessitates not only a numerical increase in female representation, but also a comprehensive re-evaluation of the institutional structures and practices that perpetuate gender disparities. It calls for proactive measures to dismantle barriers, foster inclusive environments, and develop a culture that values and supports the professional growth of women in academic leadership.

This challenge demands a collective commitment to reshaping the very fabric of academic institutions for a more equitable and inclusive future. The words of this fellow encapsulated much of what was revealed by other fellows during the interviews:

> *I have been in this department for almost 15 years now, but there is no progress in my academic growth or development. Junior African males have been promoted into leadership positions, and I am still under, making it challenging to manoeuvre in this role. Such politics within the department make one feel demotivated.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

The fellows' expressions of concern regarding promotion criteria and the probationary period stress a critical dimension of unease within the group. This collective unease suggests that there are perceived challenges or inadequacies in the existing frameworks for evaluating and advancing the careers of the fellows. The promotion criteria, which typically delineate the expectations and benchmarks for career advancement, appear to be a main point of contention. It implies that fellows might not experience the established parameters as transparent, fair, or aligned with their diverse contributions.

Moreover, an examination of probation periods among different racial and gender groups revealed significant disparities. While there is variability in the duration of probation periods for White individuals, instances of shorter probation durations exist. In contrast, African individuals, despite comprising a significant portion of the academic staff, often endure longer probation periods, some lasting up to six years. Furthermore, the absence of Coloured individuals from the probation list for professors' hints at potential underrepresentation or exclusion from higher academic roles.

Probation periods were often extended. For example, one probation started on January 1, 2013, and lasted until January 1, 2015 (two years). It was extended for a further four years, from January 1, 2015, to December 2019 totalling six years' probation. Another record of the latest probations began on January 1, 2021, and ended on January 31, 2023 (two years), but was extended from February 2023 until December 2026 (three years), totalling five years' probation. Fellows also indicated that some would be on probation for three years and then face another three years, resulting in a total of six years.

In 2021, there were 2 428 staff on probation at Wits dating back to 2013. However, the focus of this study was academics and academic leaders, which totalled 763 staff. Probation data from Wits was used to compile Table 6.3.

TABLE 6.3: FELLOW'S PROMOTIONS, 2021 AND 2022[59]

Position	White		African		Coloured		Indian		Chinese		TOTAL
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Lecturers and senior lecturers	112	125	162	141	14	30	30	64	1	3	**682**
Associate professors and professors	24	12	26	2	-	-	7	3			**74**
Heads of schools	3	1	2	-	-	-	1				**7**

According to Table 6.3, there were 682 lecturers and senior lecturers, comprising 257 White individuals (112 male and 125 female), 303 African individuals (141 female and 162 male), 44 Coloured individuals (14 male and 30 female), 94 Indian individuals (30 male and 64 female), and four Chinese individuals (three female and one male). The overall probation period for the 682 lecturers and senior lecturers was predominantly three years, with some extended periods including one for 12 months, one for two years, and one for six months.

There were also 74 associate professors, professors, and adjunct professors, consisting of 24 White males, 12 White females, 28 African males, two African females, seven Indian males, and three Indian females. There were no records of Coloured individuals on the probation list for professors. Additionally, there were seven head of schools, including acting heads of schools, with nine on 12 months' probation and seven on three years' probation. Among them, three were White females, one was a White male, two were African males, and one was an Indian male.

The analysis of the data concerning lecturers and senior lecturers unveils a stark discrepancy in representation across various racial and gender demographics. While African individuals form the largest cohort with 303 members, White individuals follow closely behind with 257. Conversely, individuals from Coloured backgrounds are notably underrepresented in the probation data set, considering the population of African and Coloured people in South Africa. Indian and Chinese individuals represent a smaller population, but are represented in the dataset. This glaring contrast in representation shows potential systemic biases in Wits' hiring and promotion practices, particularly disadvantaging those from historically marginalised communities.

The implications of the probation disparities extend beyond mere procedural discrepancies. Prolonged probation periods can exacerbate existing inequalities and pose formidable barriers to career advancement for marginalised groups within academia. The narratives shared by the fellows expressing apprehension about their probation durations further underscore the detrimental effects of prolonged probation on the career trajectories and overall well-being of marginalised individuals.

To address these disparities effectively, Wits and similar institutions should adopt equitable and transparent policies for probation assessment and progression. Regular evaluations of probation processes are imperative to ensure fairness and uniformity across all racial and gender demographics.[60] Additionally, the implementation of targeted support programs and mentorship initiatives tailored to the specific needs of marginalised groups can help mitigate the adverse effects of extended probation periods and facilitate these groups' academic and professional success.[61] Ultimately, rectifying these disparities is essential for cultivating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment at Wits and across higher education institutions worldwide. The words of this fellow captured the overall sentiment of the interviewed fellows:

> *I have been on probation for five years, and interestingly, one of my colleagues has been on probation for seven years. It's not uncommon in my faculty for individuals to undergo such prolonged probationary periods. This situation prompts questions about the criteria for probation, especially when we witness newly appointed colleagues securing permanent positions after only three years. The observed disparities in this process raise concerns about potential bias.*
>
> **~ 2023 FELLOW**

Concerns related to the probationary period suggest that there might be ambiguities or issues surrounding the expectations and support mechanisms during this crucial phase of an academic career. The probationary period is pivotal for early-career academics, and any uncertainties or discrepancies in its structure could influence the professional trajectories of the fellows. These concerns collectively highlight the need for a thorough examination and, potentially, a re-evaluation of the promotion criteria and probationary period within the academic context. Addressing these issues is essential not only for the well-being and career progression of the fellows but also for fostering a more equitable and supportive academic environment. It prompts a call for transparent, inclusive, and well-defined frameworks that can accommodate the diverse experiences and aspirations of the academic community.

Extended probation periods in higher education institutions can exacerbate gender inequality, particularly disadvantaging female academics' career trajectories, and professional development. Research indicates that women are more likely to face prolonged probationary periods compared to their male counterparts.[62] Moreover, prolonged probation can contribute to feelings of insecurity and lack of recognition, further perpetuating gender disparities in academic settings.[63] This disparity often stems from systemic biases and gender stereotypes prevalent in academic environments, where women are frequently undervalued and their contributions overlooked.[64]

Female academics may also face additional challenges during probation, such as balancing family responsibilities and caregiving duties, further compounding the impact of extended probation periods.[65] The intersectionality of gender with other social identities, such as race and ethnicity, can further exacerbate the disadvantages faced by marginalised groups of female academics.[66]

Some fellows shared similar sentiments regarding long probation, while others experienced gender discrimination, which goes along with what they called 'punishment for childbearing.' For example, a fellow who shared a similar experience to others was engaged to be married, in the process of relocating, and had become a new mother.

> *As a lecturer and someone registered for her PhD, I experienced significant delays in my doctoral journey to the point where I contemplated dropping out due to the lack of support. Just as I was about to officially submit a letter to discontinue my PhD, I came across the FALF. After exploring the FALF website, I decided to postpone submitting the withdrawal letter to the school and faculty. Fortunately, the FALF accepted my application and provided me with a generous grant. This financial support allowed me to take a teaching buyout, enabling me to focus intensively on my PhD and research publications. The outcome exceeded my expectations as I completed my PhD in a shorter time frame and produced more research outcomes than anticipated. This experience marked my first research grant of this nature, and the FALF not only gave me an opportunity but also provided the support I needed to grow. ~ 2021 fellow*
>
> **~ 2023 FELLOW**

This initial grant from the FALF served as a catalyst for her academic growth, opening doors to subsequent opportunities, including securing a second major grant. The FALF leadership workshop played a crucial role in her professional development. The culmination of these achievements included a promotion to senior lecturer, the publication of six articles, active participation in international and local conferences, and successful supervision of multiple students at the honours and master's levels. This narrative exemplifies the challenges and triumphs inherent in navigating academia while managing personal life changes, highlighting the transformative impact of targeted support programs like the FALF.

In conclusion, addressing gender inequality in higher education requires a concerted effort to reform probationary practices and create a more inclusive academic environment. By recognising and addressing the challenges faced by female academics during probation, institutions can work towards fostering gender equity and promoting the advancement of women in academia.

6.3.2 Mental Health Strain

Fellows have reported grappling with mental health strains, underscoring the importance of institutional initiatives such as counselling services and mentorship programs. Recognising and addressing these mental health challenges is essential for the overall well-being of female academics. While fellows acknowledge that their faculties and schools address mental health, they emphasise that more can still be done, particularly in prioritising the mental health of their staff. Some fellows have shared their ongoing struggles with mental health, attributing it to the inherent challenges of their positions. Additionally, there are accounts of female fellows feeling oppressed in various spaces within Wits. Their collective call is for more support for staff across schools and faculties. Two fellows have resigned due to mental strain, underscoring the urgency and importance of addressing mental health concerns within the academic setting. These sentiments were shared by many fellows, as seen in this quote:

> *I am currently navigating through significant challenges. A diagnosis of depression has added to the complexities of my situation. The battles I've been fighting within my school have taken a toll on my mental health, reaching a point where resigning seemed like a viable option. In a department heavily dominated by males, the struggles for us, as female colleagues, persist. It's notable that the challenges are shared among us, irrespective of race. Female colleagues collectively voice their concerns and experiences in this male-dominated environment.*
>
> **~ 2023 FELLOW**

Fellows expressed gratitude for the support provided by the FALF structure, emphasising how it has been instrumental in their lives. Having felt consistently isolated, the introduction of a community and a pod through the FALF had made significant differences to many fellows. The importance of a robust support structure is highlighted, especially since some individuals endure challenging times alone within their schools or faculties. The reluctance to share personal challenges is acknowledged, stemming from the fear that such information could be used against them. This fear is particularly evident when individuals are facing difficulties at home or are seeking promotions. One fellow highlighted the need for a supportive environment where individuals can share their experiences without fear of repercussion or exploitation of personal challenges in professional contexts.

The challenges faced by female academics in navigating mental health strains within the academic setting are well documented in the research literature. Studies have highlighted the heightened risk of anxiety and depression among female faculty members, attributed to factors such as work-life balance challenges and gender discrimination.[67]

Furthermore, institutional support structures play a crucial role in addressing these mental health strains. Accessible counselling services and mentorship programs are important in mitigating stressors and promoting well-being among academic staff. Additionally, gendered challenges within academia contribute to the mental health burdens experienced by female academics.[68] The intersectionality of gender and race reveal unique challenges faced by women of colour in oppressive academic spaces.[69]

These challenges indicate the urgent need for comprehensive support structures within institutions to address mental health concerns and foster inclusive environments where all faculty members can thrive both personally and professionally.

6.3.3 Departmental Politics

The fellows' narratives also reveal the challenges that women encounter when pursuing their academic careers. One of the main challenges was the intricate landscape of departmental politics. As these women ascend the ranks in academia, they find themselves entangled in a web of institutional dynamics that extend beyond their scholarly pursuits. Their accounts reveal the nuanced challenges faced by female academics in dealing with departmental politics. One fellow shared her experience of subtle power struggles, where decisions seemed to be influenced by factors other than merit, a sentiment shared by other fellows. Like in any industry, the complexities of office politics often creates an environment where manoeuvring through professional relationships becomes as crucial as academic achievements and merit.

Some expressed frustration at the lack of transparency and fairness in decision-making processes, while others grappled with the gender biases embedded within these political dynamics. Gendered power dynamics and intersectional challenges are faced by women, particularly those from marginalised groups, in navigating institutional politics.[70]

The impact of departmental politics on the well-being and career trajectory of female academics is palpable, and emphasises the psychological toll and career barriers imposed by opaque decision-making processes and gender biases.[71] However, supportive initiatives such as mentorship programs,[72] and strategies for promoting transparency and equity,[73] offer avenues for mitigating the negative effects of departmental politics. While the FALF program provides African and Coloured women with resources and support structures to advance their academic careers, this research highlights the urgent need for transparent evaluation processes, diversity training, and the establishment of equity-focused committees to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment within academic departments. In essence, a transparent evaluation process, diversity training, and the establishment of equity-focused committees are essential to mitigate the impact of departmental politics on career progression. One fellow summarised the experiences of the majority of fellows:

> *With office politics in academia, [it] feels like walking through a maze. As women, we face extra challenges like unfair decisions and hidden biases.*
>
> **~ 2023 FELLOW**

Her words encapsulate the complex and often daunting experience of navigating departmental politics within academia, particularly from the perspective of female academics. The analogy of walking through a maze suggests a sense of confusion, uncertainty, and difficulty in finding one's way amid the intricate web of institutional dynamics and power structures. As women in academia, individuals may encounter additional challenges beyond those faced by their male counterparts, including unfair treatment and biases embedded within the system. These challenges can manifest in various forms, such as disparities in resource allocation, promotion, and tenure decisions influenced by gender biases, or exclusion from informal networks and decision-making circles.

There is the need for greater awareness and effort to address gender disparities and biases within academic institutions, ensuring fair and equitable treatment for all faculty members, regardless of gender, as highlighted in this quote:

> *Office politics affects us a lot. It's not just about being promoted; about staying sane in a stressful environment.*
>
> **~ 2022 FELLOW**

This quote reflects the significant impact of office politics on the well-being and professional experience of individuals within academia. It highlights that beyond the tangible outcomes like promotions or advancements, navigating office politics is crucial for maintaining one's mental health and resilience in a challenging and demanding environment. This perspective highlights the importance of fostering a supportive and transparent workplace culture that prioritises the psychological well-being of its members alongside their career development.

This quote vividly captures the intricate and challenging nature of office politics in academia:

> *Office politics in academia is like a complex puzzle, with every move scrutinized and every decision influenced by unseen forces. As female academics, we not only have to excel in our research but also navigate through layers of bias and inequality. It's like trying to find your way through a dense forest where the paths are unclear, and every step requires careful consideration. Despite the challenges, initiatives like the FALF provide a supportive community where we can share our experiences and strategies for overcoming these obstacles. Together, we empower each other to rise above the politics and focus on our passion for knowledge and education. ~ 2021 fellow*
>
> **~ 2022 FELLOW**

The fellow likened it to navigating through a complex puzzle or dense forest. she emphasised the additional hurdles faced by female academics, who must not only excel in their research but also contend with layers of bias and inequality. Despite these challenges, initiatives like the FALF provide a supportive community where members can share experiences and strategies for overcoming obstacles. Together, they empower each other to rise above the politics and remain focused on their passion for knowledge and education.

Departmental politics also had a negative impact on pod groups; some pods had challenges of departmental conflicts being carried into the pod. In another case, academic rank was prioritised over peer collaboration and support. The narratives shed light on the delicate balance these women must strike, advocating for their professional interests while navigating the intricate social dynamics that define their academic spaces. Yet, amid these challenges, the fellows found solace and a safe space through the supportive community that the fellowship provides. The shared experiences of negotiating departmental politics foster a sense of solidarity, empowering these women to navigate the complexities of academic life with resilience and determination. The fellows' narratives underline the importance of initiatives like the FALF, which not only equip female academics with leadership skills, but also offer a sanctuary where they can collectively confront and overcome the nuances of departmental politics. Overall, the fellows interviewed believed participation in the pods provided both instrumental and social-psychological support, which helped them to navigate some of the challenges they experienced.

It is crucial to acknowledge the resilience and determination of female academics in navigating departmental politics. Despite the challenges they face, fellows continue to push boundaries, challenge stereotypes, and advocate for change within their academic spaces. Their stories serve as inspiration for future generations of female scholars, highlighting the importance of perseverance and solidarity in overcoming institutional barriers. However, it is also important to note that, departmental politics present significant challenges for female academics, impacting their well-being and career advancement. Through supportive initiatives like the FALF and the implementation of transparent evaluation processes and diversity training, there is hope for a more equitable and inclusive academic environment. Moving forward, it is essential to continue to amplify the fellows' voices, address systemic inequalities, and foster meritorious environments where all academics, regardless of gender or background, have equal opportunities to thrive.

6.3.4 Heavy Workloads

The experiences shared by fellows regarding an increased workload, especially concerning administrative tasks, emphasise the disproportionate burden placed on female academics, which often goes unrecognised in promotion and tenure processes.[74] This imbalance not only undermines the professional advancement of female faculty members but also contributes to job dissatisfaction and burnout.[75] Within the context of the FALF, fellows revealed a common sentiment of being stretched thin due to the additional demands of administrative responsibilities alongside their core academic duties of research, supervision, academic citizenship, and teaching. This heightened workload can affect various aspects of their professional lives, including research productivity, career advancement opportunities, and overall well-being. To address this challenge effectively, redistributing administrative responsibilities, providing dedicated support staff, and integrating academic citizenship into promotion processes are crucial steps. Workload distribution and the contributions of faculty members beyond traditional metrics, such as research output, should be recognised.[76] By implementing such initiatives, academic institutions can create a more supportive and inclusive environment that values and supports the diverse responsibilities undertaken by female academics, ultimately fostering their professional growth and success.

In response to these challenges, it is evident that redistributing administrative responsibilities would significantly alleviate the burden on the fellows. Creating a more equitable distribution of tasks ensures that the academic workload remains manageable, allowing individuals to focus on their core teaching and research commitments. Furthermore, there is a clear call for providing dedicated support staff, acknowledging the specialised expertise needed for effective administrative management. This additional support would not only lighten the workload for the fellows but also enhance the efficiency and quality of administrative processes.

Fellows accentuated the importance of recognising academic citizenship in promotion processes. While administrative tasks are integral to the functioning of academic departments, they often go unnoticed in promotion evaluations. Acknowledging and valuing these contributions in the promotion criteria can serve as a powerful incentive and recognition for the additional responsibilities shouldered by the fellows. In essence, the narratives of the fellows bring attention to the pressing need for structural adjustments to address the increased workload, particularly administrative tasks. Implementing redistributive measures, providing dedicated support, and acknowledging administration work as academic citizenship are pivotal steps in ensuring the well-being and professional growth of the individuals within the program, as reflected in this quote:

> *I was able to hire a research assistant with my FALF grant so that there is no delay in data collection and analysis while I have so much admin and lecturing to do. When the research assistant was done, I was able to take some time with my teaching buyout, and I published two book chapters and four articles from this study. This study was [initially] delayed due to a lack of availability, as we get extremely busy throughout the year. The FALF really assisted me by providing resources, and this year I was promoted to associate professor.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

This transformative experience illustrates the practical impact of the FALF on the fellows' academic journey. This fellow made a strategic decision to hire a research assistant, a move aimed at mitigating potential delays in data collection and analysis. This strategic allocation of resources allowed her to navigate the demands of administrative tasks and lecturing without compromising the progress of her research. The outcomes were substantial – two book chapters and four articles stemming from her study, along with a promotion to associate professor. The fellow highlighted the inherent challenges in conducting research amid a hectic schedule throughout the academic year, and the FALF grant emerged as a crucial enabler in overcoming these hurdles. This not only underscores the tangible impact of the FALF resources but also highlights how strategic allocation of these resources can lead to prolific research outcomes and career advancement.

6.3.5 Gatekeeping

The persistence of gatekeeping practices within academia presents significant barriers to the advancement of female academics. The detrimental impact of gatekeeping on the career progression of women, particularly those from marginalised groups, emphasises the compounded barriers faced by women of colour due to intersectional biases.[77] Effectively addressing these challenges requires a firm institutional commitment to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion.[78] Institutional initiatives aimed at promoting transparency, fairness, and unbiased evaluation processes are essential in dismantling gatekeeping practices and creating a more inclusive academic environment. The narratives shared by the fellows demonstrate the urgent need for tangible actions to challenge implicit biases and ensure that merit and capabilities take precedence over systemic barriers. Through its comprehensive support mechanisms, the FALF has emerged as a beacon of empowerment, actively bridging the gaps faced by female academics and fostering an environment where all individuals can thrive based on merit and competence. A fellow's story follows:

> *As the head of the department, I've personally encountered instances of gatekeeping, with one notable incident where my name was unexpectedly removed from consideration for a position without prior notification. This lack of transparency was concerning, as I hadn't been informed of any reasons for my exclusion. Moreover, I've observed both junior and senior staff within the department facing similar gatekeeping practices, wherein their qualifications and capabilities are undermined or overlooked without due process. Unfortunately, while some individuals do report such incidents, many remain silent, contributing to a culture where gatekeeping persists unchecked. In some distressing cases, these dynamics even escalate to instances of sexual abuse.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

This account echoes broader research findings on gatekeeping practices within academic institutions. Instances of individuals being side lined or excluded from opportunities without transparent explanations are common, reflecting systemic biases and power dynamics at play. Persistent gender bias in leadership positions[79] and gatekeeping practices in academia,[80] not only undermine individuals' professional aspirations but also take a toll on their psychological well-being.[81] Moreover, the reluctance to report incidents contributes to the perpetuation of gatekeeping behaviours and the maintenance of an unequal status quo.[82] Addressing these issues requires proactive measures from institutions to foster transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, thereby creating a supportive environment where all individuals have equal opportunities for advancement and are protected from discriminatory practices.

Gatekeeping practices have been identified as significant barriers impeding the advancement of female academics. Effectively addressing these challenges necessitates a firm institutional commitment to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion. This commitment should manifest in comprehensive measures, such as unbiased evaluation processes and proactive initiatives aimed at challenging implicit biases. The recognition of gatekeeping as a persistent issue confirms the imperative for institutions to undertake deliberate efforts to create a more inclusive academic environment. By ensuring that evaluation processes are free from bias and promote transparency, institutions can actively dismantle barriers that hinder the progression of female academics. Proactive measures, designed to challenge implicit biases at every level, become pivotal in fostering an environment where merit and capabilities take precedence over systemic barriers.

This quote echoes many fellows' common stories:

> *I experienced the devastating impact of gatekeeping first-hand within the department, orchestrated by an African female leader. Her deliberate actions made my life in the academic realm miserable, undermining my confidence to the extent that seeking counselling and coaching services became a necessary step to regain a sense of self that was lost in the process. As a senior staff member, the toll of this gatekeeping was profound, affecting not only my professional standing but also diminishing my role as a private investigator in academic studies.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

It is evident that the FALF's commitment to empowering female academics extends beyond mere rhetoric, and its robust support systems have played a pivotal role in bridging the gaps that arise from the diverse challenges, of which gatekeeping is only one, faced by the fellows. Two fellows who requested assistance because of gatekeeping were referred to academic coaches who assisted them to deal with gatekeeping in a professional manner, while they sought psychological help to deal with the mental strain.

In essence, the FALF acknowledges the unique challenges faced by female academics and provides resources and avenues for growth. The fellowship's holistic approach to empowerment fosters an environment where women can contribute meaningfully to academia.

6.3.6 Work-Life Conflicts

In higher education institutions, female academic leaders grapple with the intricate balance between professional responsibilities and the demands of their personal lives. The intersection of gender norms, societal expectations, and institutional structures often exacerbate work-life conflict for these leaders. Juggling teaching, research, and administrative duties, with familial responsibilities can lead to heightened stress, feelings of guilt, and challenges in achieving a work-life balance.

Gendered perspectives significantly shape the experiences of work-life conflict among female academic leaders. Societal norms around caregiving and domestic duties often place additional pressure on women in leadership positions. Institutional factors, such as rigid tenure processes, limited family-friendly policies, and a competitive academic environment, further compound these challenges.

Addressing work-life conflict among female academic leaders requires a holistic approach that encompasses individual support mechanisms and institutional reforms. Implementing flexible work arrangements, providing access to childcare and family support services, fostering mentorship networks, and advocating for policy changes that prioritise work-life balance are crucial steps toward creating supportive environments where female academic leaders can thrive both personally and professionally. These quotes captured the same sentiments expressed by numerous other fellows:

> *As a female academic leader, balancing my career aspirations with my family responsibilities has been a constant struggle. The expectation to excel in my role while also fulfilling societal norms of caregiving often leaves me feeling torn between my professional ambitions and personal obligations. Without adequate support from my institution, navigating work-life conflict becomes even more challenging.*
>
> **~ 2022 FELLOW**

> *You can't have it all, they say. As a female academic leader, I'm constantly reminded of this reality as I strive to excel in my career while also being present for my family. The demands of academia, coupled with societal expectations of motherhood and homemaking, often leave me feeling overwhelmed and stretched thin. It's a delicate balance that requires constant negotiation and sacrifice.*
>
> **~ 2023 FELLOW**

The exploration into the pervasive nature of work-life conflict among the fellows unearthed a common thread among many fellows regarding childbearing as a work-life conflict element:

> *Childbearing often feels like a double-edged sword for women in academia. While it's a beautiful and fulfilling aspect of life, it's also seen as a 'punishment' in our professional realm. While my male counterparts seamlessly progress in their careers, women are often sidelined or delayed in their advancement due to the demands of motherhood. It's disheartening to witness the stark contrast of how parenthood affects career trajectories between genders.*
>
> **~ 2021 FELLOW**

Work-life conflict remains a persistent challenge for female academic leaders, characterised by the intricate balance between professional aspirations and personal responsibilities. Despite the strides made in addressing gender disparities and promoting work-life balance initiatives, the journey towards equity and inclusivity in academia is ongoing. It is imperative to recognise the multifaceted nature of work-life conflict, appreciate the diverse needs of female leaders, advocate for supportive policies, and foster inclusive environments. Collectively addressing these challenges could pave the way for a more equitable and fulfilling academic landscape where all individuals, regardless of gender, can thrive both personally and professionally.

7. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study shed light on the impact of the FALF program on women academics at Wits. The results suggested that the FALF has had a positive influence on various aspects of the professional lives of women within the academic sphere. Specifically, the data indicated that increased publications, promotions, social structures to support mental health, and enhanced leadership opportunities addressed some key challenges faced by women academics and fostered their professional development within the university context.

The repetition of discussing mental health and departmental politics in both sections 6.3 and 7.0 is intentional and serves a specific purpose. While these topics are introduced in section 6.3 as part of the broader findings, they are revisited in section 7.0 to provide a more detailed and focused analysis of their implications. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of these critical issues from multiple perspectives, reinforcing their importance within the context of the study. By examining these themes again, the report ensures that their impact is fully recognized and adequately addressed, highlighting their relevance to both the findings and the study's overall conclusions.

The key obstacles faced by fellows were similar to those reported in other studies, but there are some unique features relevant to the South African context, and specifically Wits in this case, such as the probation period structure, and heavy workloads due to the increased demands of administration. The persistent gender disparities observed in academia are not unique to any institution or region although probation periods may differ by institution; they represent broader systemic issues that affect women in academic settings worldwide. Traditional gender norms and societal expectations permeate academic environments, influencing the career trajectories and opportunities available to female academics globally.[83] To address these entrenched inequalities, interventions such as flexible work policies, family support initiatives, and awareness campaigns challenging gender stereotypes are essential.

7.1 GENDER INEQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

On a global scale, gender inequality in higher education is influenced by cultural norms, economic disparities, and discriminatory policies.[84] Tackling these global disparities requires concerted efforts to promote equitable educational opportunities for all and acknowledge the diverse challenges faced by women in different regions and contexts. By addressing these multifaceted issues, institutions can work towards fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.[85] The challenges highlighted by fellows reflect global trends in gender inequality within higher education.

Despite the progress made in some regions, the pervasive nature of gender inequality in academia transcends geographical boundaries. Disparities persist despite varying levels of institutional support.[86] While institutions in the United Kingdom may offer more robust mentorship programs and inclusive policies, challenges such as biased evaluation processes and entrenched stereotypes continue to hinder women's advancement in academia. The absence of robust mentorship and networking opportunities exacerbates gender inequality in higher education.[87] These observations underscore the global nature of gender inequality within higher education and emphasise the ongoing need for concerted efforts to promote equity and inclusivity across academic institutions worldwide. Recognising the intersectionality of gender with other social identities is crucial in addressing disparities.[88] Policies and interventions should be crafted to account for these complexities, avoiding the perpetuation of disparities for specific groups of women.

This study's findings mirror the persistent gender inequality entrenched within academia on a global scale. This inequality manifests in various facets, impacting resource allocation, job satisfaction, and career progression for women. Addressing systemic challenges necessitates concerted efforts to promote equity and inclusivity within academic environments. By implementing comprehensive interventions, institutions have the potential to cultivate a more inclusive and equitable academic landscape, thereby fostering opportunities for all individuals regardless of gender. Contextualising the fellows' experiences within the broader discourse on gender inequality in academia, the significance of local interventions like the FALF is recognised.

7.2 DEPARTMENTAL POLITICS

The experiences shared by the fellows resonate with the broader global challenges faced by women in academia. Their narratives of navigating departmental politics, overcoming biases, and balancing career aspirations with family responsibilities reflect universal struggles encountered by female academics. The systemic issues highlighted in this study, such as the strain of departmental politics, are not isolated incidents but rather manifestations of entrenched gender biases prevalent across academic institutions globally.

The impact of departmental politics on the career progression of female academics can be detrimental.[89] Examples of gatekeeping practices might include biased promotion criteria, exclusion from decision-making processes, or implicit biases in hiring and promotion committees.[90] This highlights the need for transparent and unbiased evaluation processes,[91] and recommends the adoption of blind review processes for promotions, establishing diversity and inclusion committees, and providing training on unconscious bias[92] to faculty and administrators. Institutions like Stanford University and the University of Oxford have implemented initiatives to address departmental politics and gatekeeping. Stanford University's Diversity and Inclusion Committee works to promote fairness and equity in all academic processes, including promotions and tenure decisions.[93] Meanwhile, the University of Oxford's Unconscious Bias Training Program provides faculty and administrators with the tools to recognise and mitigate biases in decision-making processes.[94]

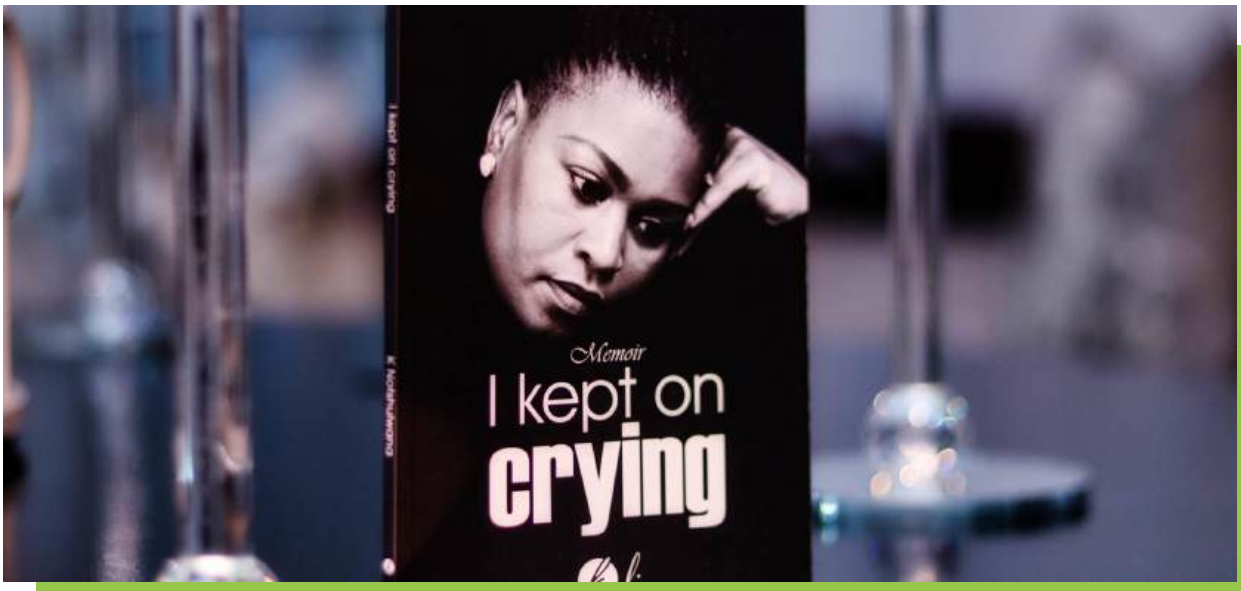
Moreover, departmental politics in academia often manifest in resource allocation battles, and promotion and tenure decisions.[95] Securing funding, research resources, and administrative support can become highly competitive endeavours, leading to tensions and conflicts within departments as faculty members vie for limited resources to support their research projects or initiatives. Additionally, promotion and tenure decisions, critical milestones in academic careers, can be heavily influenced by departmental politics.[96] Faculty members may encounter challenges in demonstrating their achievements and contributions, particularly if decision-makers harbour biases or favour certain individuals or research areas. This dynamic can create a sense of unfairness and frustration among those who feel overlooked or undervalued in the promotion process.

7.3 MENTAL HEALTH

The mental health strain reported by the fellows underlines the broader challenges women encounter in navigating a patriarchal and racialized academic environment. Mental health challenges among female academics are multifaceted and require nuanced interventions. Juggling multiple roles takes a toll on mental well-being. The administrative workload, when combined with academic responsibilities, leads to long working hours, heightened stress levels, feelings of overwhelm, and even burnout. In response, institutions need to re-evaluate practices to ensure a balance between administrative tasks and core academic pursuits, promoting a healthier work environment.

The challenges encountered by female academics, particularly concerning mental health and managing multiple roles, are widely acknowledged and delve into the intricate intersection of academic responsibilities and household duties, shedding light on the profound impact on mental well-being, and the factors contributing to burnout among female academics, emphasising the need for interventions that promote work-life balance.[97] The internal conflict experienced by women navigating traditional gender roles, both at home and in the workplace highlights the importance of addressing societal expectations to alleviate mental strain and promote emotional well-being among female academics.[98]

Institutional support and resources play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of these challenges on the mental health of female academics and show the significance of adequate resources, such as childcare facilities and flexible work policies, in creating a supportive environment within academic institutions.[99] These interventions are essential for addressing the unique challenges faced by women in academia and fostering a work environment that promotes their well-being. Moreover, the importance of institutions fostering an inclusive, supportive, and respectful institutional culture, can play a pivotal role in promoting the mental health and overall well-being of female academics, addressing gender dynamics and micro-aggressions.[100]



Mental health support initiatives, such as dedicated counselling services aimed at providing confidential support and resources for female academics experiencing mental health challenges, should be considered.[101] Additionally, mentorship programs should be enhanced to include regular mental health check-ins, where mentors offer guidance and support tailored to the well-being of their mentees.[102] Workshops focusing on stress management techniques and coping strategies can also be organised to equip female academics with practical tools to navigate the demands of their academic careers while prioritising their mental health.[103]

The struggle to navigate traditional gender roles, both at home and in the workplace, creates constant internal conflict. Addressing societal expectations is crucial for alleviating the mental strain on female academics, allowing them to thrive in their professional and personal lives. Strategies that support work-life balance, such as flexible work policies and childcare facilities, are essential to mitigate the impact on mental health, while limited institutional support amplifies the challenges faced by female academics. Adequate resources and flexible policies are necessary for creating a supportive environment that recognises and addresses the unique challenges women encounter, which is crucial for the mental well-being of female academics.

7.4 CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Academic citizenship contributions, such as service on committees, participation in departmental activities, and mentoring roles, should be taken into account in promotion and tenure processes to ensure that female academics are not disproportionately disadvantaged due to service commitment administration. The increased workload associated with administrative tasks poses a significant challenge for female academics, often leading to decreased research productivity and publication rates. This burden can hinder career advancement and overall job satisfaction. To address this issue effectively, institutions should consider implementing strategies to redistribute administrative responsibilities more equitably among faculty members. Dedicated support staff to assist with administrative tasks can alleviate some of the workload pressures faced by female academics, allowing them to increase their focus on their research and scholarly endeavours.

As part of performance evaluation, the University of California, Berkeley, has implemented a system that acknowledges and rewards faculty members for their service contributions.[104] By adopting similar approaches, institutions can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for female academics, promoting their professional development and career advancement opportunities. This, in turn, can contribute to greater gender equity within academia and enhance overall research productivity and innovation.

The impact of the persistent gender wage gap is profound and extends to the realm of resource allocation within institutions.[105] This economic disparity directly influences research opportunities, professional development initiatives, and overall job satisfaction for women in academia, establishing systemic barriers to their advancement in many countries, not just South Africa. To address these challenges, interventions such as flexible work policies and awareness campaigns challenging gender stereotypes are imperative.[106]

Drawing inspiration from countries with progressive policies, such as extended parental leave and flexible working hours in Nordic and European nations, can provide valuable insights into fostering more equitable gender representation in academia on a global scale.[107] Moreover, initiatives implemented by renowned institutions like Harvard University and the University of Cambridge, such as on-site childcare facilities and mentorship programs, serve as examples of effective support structures for women in academia, irrespective of geographical location.[108] In South Africa, the University of Cape Town (UCT) provides childcare facilities through the Educare centre for their staff. These initiatives are helpful for female academics' reintegration to work.

The setbacks in career progression due to maternity leave that are highlighted in this study point to deeper systemic issues.[109]Traditional gender roles and societal expectations have an impact on women in academia, necessitating interventions like flexible work policies, family support initiatives, and awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes.[110] Biased evaluation processes and the intersection of family responsibilities contribute to formidable barriers hindering women's career progression.[111] Recognising and addressing these issues necessitate the implementation of flexible work policies and comprehensive awareness campaigns aimed at challenging and dismantling ingrained stereotypes. Stereotypes regarding women's competence and leadership abilities persist, exerting influence over hiring and promotion processes.[112]To counteract these biases, concerted efforts should be made to challenge preconceived notions and establish inclusive environments that foster equal opportunities for career advancement.

7.5 THE FALF

In discussing the significance of the FALF's community-based approach, it is important to draw upon relevant research and literature that support the effectiveness of such initiatives. Community-driven programs like the FALF have been shown to enhance the retention and advancement of female academics significantly by providing them with a supportive network and mentorship opportunities.[113] Collaboration and peer support within academic communities contribute to greater job satisfaction and professional development among women in academia.[114] The role of supportive communities mitigate the impact of gender-related challenges and foster a sense of belonging and empowerment among female academics. Creating intentional and inclusive mentorship programs is pivotal for providing women with the support and guidance essential for career advancement.[115]Gender-based discrimination persists as a significant challenge in higher education.[116]Establishing clear policies against gender-based discrimination and fostering a culture of respect are essential steps toward rectifying these issues and creating a safe and inclusive environment for all. These studies reinforce the argument that the FALF's community-focused approach is grounded in evidence-based practices and aligns with broader research on the benefits of supportive networks for women in academia.

The findings illustrate the transformative impact of the FALF program, emphasising its effectiveness in addressing specific gaps within the academic landscape. Positive outcomes, such as enhanced academic profiles and fruitful collaborations, align seamlessly with the program's objectives. This not only advances individual careers but also cultivates a community of female academics contributing meaningfully to their disciplines and society. In conclusion, the findings and discussion highlight the pivotal role of local interventions like the FALF in tackling the multifaceted challenges encountered by female academics. This study contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on gender and racial inequalities in academic leadership, emphasising the imperative for sustained efforts to foster an inclusive and equitable higher education landscape.

8. IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This section emphasises the crucial role of both the FALF and institutional support in achieving the goal of empowering female academics. While the FALF endeavours to provide material and psychosocial support to its fellows, the effectiveness of these efforts is contingent upon institutions fulfilling their responsibilities. Without proactive support from institutions, the FALF's objectives may only be partially realised, posing a challenge to South African higher education. The risk exists that talented fellows may choose to leave academia or seek opportunities elsewhere if they do not receive the necessary support within their institutions.

In many ways, the FALF has stepped in to address gaps that should ideally be addressed by universities themselves, particularly by their leaders. This includes the crucial task of valuing and supporting all academic talent, with a specific focus on combating the marginalisation and exclusion experienced by African and Coloured women. These individuals play a vital role in the transformation of higher education and its contribution to nation building. Therefore, the failure of an institution to adequately support and empower these groups not only undermines their potential but also hampers the broader goals of educational transformation and national development.

The comprehensive understanding of these themes emphasises the need for targeted interventions and systemic changes within academia. The discussion explores the feminist intersectionality framework, root causes of gender inequality, departmental politics, mental health strain, workload challenges, and the importance of moving beyond financial support. These discussions provide actionable strategies and examples that an institution can adopt to create a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.

The FALF, as a program primarily serving African and Coloured female academics, demonstrates a commitment to addressing the specific challenges faced by this demographic within higher education. Recognising the intersectionality of race and gender, the program aims to rectify historical and systemic inequalities that have disproportionately affected women of colour in academia. Through tailored support mechanisms, cultural sensitivity, and awareness initiatives, the FALF acknowledges and seeks to address the unique experiences and barriers that African and Coloured female academics' encounter. By focusing on diversity in leadership, actively combating micro-aggressions and bias, fostering empowerment and community building, and advocating for policy changes, the FALF contributes to creating a more equitable and inclusive academic environment for the success of African and Coloured female academics. This targeted approach ensures that the program addresses the nuanced challenges faced by this demographic, promoting their advancement and representation within higher education.

To enhance the effectiveness and impact of the FALF program for African and Coloured female academics, the study provides recommendations in the sub-sections to follow.

8.1 COMPREHENSIVE MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Establish robust mentorship programs that pair experienced academics with fellows. These mentorship relationships should provide guidance on career development, navigating institutional challenges, and personal growth. Encourage mentors to share their own experiences and insights, creating a supportive network. Mentors play a crucial role in guiding fellows through their academic journey. They should offer insights into career pathways, provide advice on navigating the complexities of academia, and assist in overcoming obstacles. By sharing their own experiences and lessons learned, mentors can provide invaluable support to and encouragement for fellows, helping them to navigate challenges and seize opportunities for growth.

In addition to offering professional guidance, mentorship should also address personal development. Mentors can help fellows build confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging within the academic community. By fostering a supportive network, mentorship programs create a space where fellows can openly discuss challenges, seek advice, and receive encouragement from those who have walked a similar path. Encouraging mentors to actively engage with fellows and share their experiences can further enhance the effectiveness of mentorship programs. By fostering a culture of openness and collaboration, mentors can create a supportive environment where fellows feel empowered to pursue their academic and professional goals.

8.2 TAILORED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

To support African and Coloured female academics effectively, professional development initiatives should be tailored to their specific needs. These initiatives, including workshops, seminars, and training sessions, address both academic and cultural challenges, fostering a holistic approach to personal and professional growth. They encompass topics such as academic skills development, research methodologies, grant proposal writing, presentation techniques, as well as navigating cultural biases, overcoming stereotype threat, and combating imposter syndrome within academia.

By integrating academic and cultural components into these initiatives, a comprehensive framework is established, empowering fellows to thrive personally and professionally. This approach fosters an environment where African and Coloured female academics can develop the necessary skills, confidence, and resilience to excel in their careers despite any obstacles they may face.

8.3 NETWORKING & COMMUNITY BUILDING EVENTS

To nurture a supportive environment and enhance the experience of African and Coloured female academics, it is crucial to organise a diverse range of networking events and community-building activities. These gatherings serve as invaluable platforms for fellows to connect, exchange experiences, insights, and mutual support. Moreover, they provide a space for fostering a sense of belonging within the program, enabling individuals to feel part of a supportive community.

In addition to fostering connections within the program, these events present an opportunity to establish links with external networks and organisations. By expanding connections beyond the immediate program, fellows gain access to a broader range of resources, opportunities, and potential collaborators. Furthermore, forging connections with external networks can facilitate knowledge exchange, mentorship opportunities, and exposure to different perspectives, enriching the overall experience and professional development of fellows.

8.4 ADVOCACY FOR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

To address systemic inequalities in academia effectively, it is essential to engage in advocacy efforts aimed at driving institutional change. This entails working collaboratively with academic institutions to implement policies that promote inclusivity, diversity, and equity. Advocacy efforts may focus on various areas, including addressing wage gaps, ensuring fair representation of underrepresented groups at all levels of academia, and creating a supportive environment for marginalised communities.

Advocacy for institutional changes involves raising awareness about existing disparities and advocating for policies and practices that promote fairness and equality. This may include advocating for transparent hiring and promotion processes, providing equal access to resources and opportunities, and implementing diversity training programs for faculty and staff. Additionally, advocating for the recognition and celebration of diverse perspectives and contributions within academic spaces can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all members of the academic community.

By actively engaging in advocacy efforts, academic institutions can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive environment where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive and succeed. This requires ongoing collaboration and dialogue between stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, and community members, to identify and address systemic barriers and promote positive change within the academic community.

8.5 HOLISTIC WELLNESS PROGRAMS

Integrating holistic wellness programs into the FALF framework is crucial for promoting the overall well-being of fellows. These programs encompass a range of initiatives aimed at supporting mental, emotional, and physical health. By incorporating elements such as mental health support, work-life balance workshops, and stress management resources, the FALF can provide fellows with the tools and resources they need to thrive both personally and professionally. Mental health support initiatives can include access to counselling services, workshops on stress management techniques, and resources for coping with academic pressure. By addressing the mental health needs of fellows, the FALF can help them develop resilience and better manage the challenges they may encounter in their academic and professional lives.

Work-life balance workshops are essential for helping fellows maintain a healthy balance between their academic pursuits and personal responsibilities. These workshops can provide practical strategies for managing time effectively, setting boundaries, and prioritising self-care. By equipping fellows with these skills, the FALF can help them avoid burnout and sustain long-term success in their academic careers. Additionally, stress management resources such as mindfulness exercises, relaxation techniques, and wellness activities can further support the overall well-being of fellows. These resources can help fellows to reduce stress, improve concentration, and enhance their overall quality of life.

By integrating holistic wellness programs into the FALF framework, the program can foster a supportive and nurturing environment where fellows feel empowered to prioritise their well-being. This, in turn, can enhance their ability to thrive academically, professionally, and personally, ultimately contributing to their long-term success and fulfilment.

8.6 EXTRA RESEARCH FUNDING & PUBLICATION SUPPORT

After completing their the FALF grant period, it is essential to continue supporting fellows by offering targeted assistance for securing additional research funding and publication opportunities. Navigating the research landscape can be complex, and providing guidance in this area can significantly benefit fellows in advancing their academic careers. Support for research funding involves helping fellows identify relevant grant opportunities, develop competitive grant proposals, and navigate the application process. This assistance may include workshops or one-on-one sessions where fellows can receive guidance on crafting compelling proposals, budget planning, and understanding grant requirements.

Furthermore, aiding fellows in securing publication opportunities is vital for disseminating their research findings and increasing their academic visibility. This support may include assistance with manuscript preparation, journal selection, and navigating the peer-review process. Providing resources such as writing workshops, editing services, and access to publishing platforms can help fellows to communicate their research effectively to the broader academic community.

By offering targeted support for research funding and publication opportunities, the FALF continues to empower fellows to advance their academic careers. Increased visibility through publications and successful grant awards not only enhances the fellows' professional reputation but also opens up new avenues for collaboration, networking, and career advancement within their respective fields. Ultimately, this support contributes to the long-term success and impact of the fellows in academia and beyond.

8.7 CULTURAL COMPETENCE TRAINING

Incorporating cultural competence training for both fellows and mentors is essential for fostering an inclusive and supportive environment within the program. This training aims to increase awareness of cultural nuances, thus promoting respect, empathy, and understanding among fellows. Cultural competence training involves educating fellows about the diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of individuals within the program. It encourages self-reflection and examination of personal biases, stereotypes, and assumptions. By fostering a deeper understanding of cultural differences, fellows can develop the skills and knowledge needed to interact respectfully and effectively with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, cultural competence training helps to create a safe and inclusive space where fellows feel valued and respected. It promotes open dialogue, mutual respect, and collaboration, and facilitates meaningful interactions and relationships among fellows and mentors. Collaborating with the transformation office can enhance the effectiveness of cultural competence training. This office may offer expertise, resources, and support in developing and implementing culturally relevant training programs. By leveraging their knowledge and experience, the FALF can ensure that cultural competence training aligns with broader institutional efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Overall, cultural competence training plays a vital role in creating a supportive and inclusive environment within the program. By increasing awareness of cultural nuances and promoting respect and understanding, fellows can develop the skills and attitudes needed to thrive in a diverse academic community.

8.8 REGULAR FEEDBACK MECHANISMS (MENTORS AND FELLOWS)

Establishing regular feedback mechanisms is essential for ensuring the ongoing effectiveness and improvement of the program. By soliciting feedback from mentors and fellows, the FALF can gain valuable insights into its strengths and areas for improvement, allowing for timely adjustments and enhancements. Regular feedback from mentors helps to gauge the effectiveness of the program from their perspective. Mentors can provide perceptions of the experiences of fellows, the quality of mentorship relationships, and the overall impact of the FALF on fellows' academic and professional development. This feedback can inform programmatic changes, resource allocation, and mentor training initiatives, thus better meeting the needs of the fellows.

Similarly, soliciting feedback from fellows is crucial for understanding their experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. Fellows can provide insights into the effectiveness of various program components, the quality of mentorship relationships, and their overall satisfaction with the program, thus addressing evolving needs in a responsive and participant-centred manner. Establishing regular feedback mechanisms involves implementing structured feedback surveys, focus group discussions, or individual meetings with mentors and fellows. These mechanisms should be designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative feedback, allowing for comprehensive analysis and action planning. Additionally, the FALF should ensure confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest and candid feedback from fellows.

Overall, regular feedback mechanisms are critical for maintaining the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of the fellowship. By fostering a culture of open communication and continuous improvement, the program can adapt to the changing needs of fellows and maximise its positive outcomes.

8.9 ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

Creating avenues for alumni engagement is essential for fostering a strong sense of community and continuity within the program. Alumni can play a valuable role in contributing to the ongoing success and improvement of the program by sharing their experiences, insights, and expertise with current fellows. Encouraging past fellows to serve as mentors or advisors is a powerful way to leverage alumni expertise and support the development of new cohorts. Alumni mentors can offer valuable guidance, advice, and support based on their own experiences of navigating academia and the program. Their insights and perspectives can help current fellows handle challenges, set goals, and make informed decisions about their academic and professional paths.

Additionally, alumni serve as valuable role models for current fellows, demonstrating the potential for success and advancement within academia and beyond. By sharing their stories of achievement and resilience, alumni inspire and motivate current fellows to pursue their goals and aspirations. Establishing a FALF association will formalise and enhance alumni engagement efforts, and provide a platform for alumni to connect, collaborate, and support one another beyond the duration of the program. It can facilitate networking opportunities, professional development initiatives, and ongoing mentorship relationships, further enriching the experience and impact of the program for alumni and current fellows alike.

Overall, alumni engagement is a valuable asset for the program, contributing to its long-term sustainability and impact. By creating opportunities for alumni to remain engaged and involved, the FALF can continue to benefit from their expertise and support, and contribute to the success of future cohorts.

8.10 COLLABORATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

Forging partnerships with external organisations that align with the goals of the FALF is instrumental in expanding resources, providing additional opportunities, and creating a broader network of support for African and Coloured female academics. Collaboration with external organisations offers numerous benefits, including access to expertise, funding, and a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. By collaborating with organisations that share similar values and objectives, the FALF can leverage their resources and networks to enhance the program's impact and reach. These partnerships may involve academic institutions, research centres, non-profit organisations, government agencies, and industry partners, among others. One key aspect of collaboration with external organisations is the opportunity to access additional resources to support program activities and initiatives. External partners may provide funding, in-kind support, or expertise to supplement the program's existing resources and infrastructure. This can enable the FALF to expand its programming, offer new opportunities for fellows, and enhance the overall quality of the program.

Furthermore, partnerships with external organisations can provide additional opportunities for fellows to engage in collaborative research, internships, mentorship programs, and other professional development activities. These opportunities can broaden fellows' experiences, expose them to new ideas and perspectives, and help them build valuable connections within their field of study. The concept of collaborating with international universities represents a particularly promising avenue that can facilitate cultural exchange, promote partnership on research projects, and provide opportunities for international study and professional development. This exposure to global perspectives and networks can enrich fellows' academic experiences and broaden their career opportunities.

By implementing these recommendations and fostering collaboration with external organisations, the FALF can further elevate its impact and create a dynamic and supportive program that empowers African and Coloured female academics to thrive in their academic careers and beyond. Collaborative partnerships amplify the program's reach and effectiveness, enabling it to make a meaningful and lasting contribution to the advancement of women in academia.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WITS

Institutions of higher learning play a crucial role in supporting the success and well-being of female academics. Several specific recommendations for the host institution, Wits, are made in this section.

9.1 PROACTIVE SUPPORT SYSTEMS

To complement the efforts of programs like the FALF and foster an environment conducive to the advancement of women in academia, Wits should prioritise the establishment of proactive support systems. Material resources are essential for enabling female academics to excel in their research and scholarly pursuits. This includes providing adequate funding to support research projects, conference attendance, publication costs, and other academic activities. Wits should also invest in state-of-the-art infrastructure, laboratories, libraries, and technology to facilitate cutting-edge research and innovation.

In addition to material resources, psychosocial support is equally important for the overall well-being and success of female academics. Mentorship programs offer valuable guidance, advice, and support to female academics at all stages of their careers. Mentors can provide valuable insights, share experiences, and offer encouragement to navigate challenges and seize opportunities for professional growth and advancement. Counselling services are another critical component of proactive support systems, providing female academics with access to confidential and professional support for their mental health and well-being. Academic life can be demanding and stressful; counselling services offer a safe space for female academics to address issues such as stress, anxiety, imposter syndrome, and work-life balance challenges.

By establishing proactive support systems that address both material and psychosocial needs, Wits can create a supportive and inclusive environment where female academics can thrive and succeed. These support systems not only enhance the retention and advancement of female academics, but also contribute to the overall excellence and diversity of the academic community.

9.2 LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT

Leadership commitment is crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all members of the academic community, especially African and Coloured women who have historically faced marginalisation and exclusion. Leaders play a pivotal role in setting the tone and direction for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion across all aspects of academic life. Demonstrating a commitment to valuing and supporting all academic talent requires proactive leadership actions and initiatives. Wits leaders should prioritise diversity, equity, and inclusion in their strategic plans, policies, and decision-making processes. This includes actively recruiting and retaining diverse faculty, staff, and students, as well as promoting inclusive practices and policies that foster a sense of belonging and respect for all members of the academic community.

Leadership commitment also involves allocating resources and investing in initiatives that address systemic barriers and promote the advancement of underrepresented groups, including African and Coloured women. This may include funding for diversity programs, professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, and support services tailored to the needs of marginalised individuals. Moreover, Wits leaders should actively engage with faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders to ensure that diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are effectively implemented and aligned with the needs and priorities of the academic community. This requires fostering open communication, listening to diverse perspectives, and taking meaningful action to address issues of inequality and discrimination.

By demonstrating a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, Wits leaders can create a culture of respect, belonging, and excellence where all members of the academic community can thrive and succeed. This not only benefits individual students, faculty, and staff but also contributes to the overall strength and reputation of Wits as a whole.

9.3 COMBAT MARGINALISATION

Institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to combat the marginalisation and exclusion experienced by certain groups within the academic community. This requires implementing policies and practices that promote equity and address systemic barriers to advancement for marginalised individuals. Combatting marginalisation begins with a commitment to understanding and acknowledging the unique challenges faced by marginalised groups, including but not limited to women, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and individuals with disabilities. Wits should recognise that systemic inequalities exist within academia and take proactive steps to dismantle them.

One important way to combat marginalisation is through the implementation of equity-minded policies and practices. This includes ensuring fair and transparent recruitment, hiring, and promotion processes that prioritise diversity and inclusion. Wits should actively seek to diversify its faculty, staff, and leadership positions to reflect the rich diversity of its student body and the broader community. Additionally, Wits should address systemic barriers to advancement that disproportionately affect marginalised individuals. This might include providing targeted support and resources for underrepresented groups, such as mentorship programs, professional development opportunities, and support services tailored to their specific needs.

Moreover, combatting marginalisation requires fostering a culture of inclusivity and belonging within the academic community. Wits should actively promote awareness and understanding of issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion through education, training, and dialogue. Creating safe and supportive spaces where individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to participate fully in academic life is essential. By actively combatting marginalisation and promoting equity, in general, institutions of higher learning can create a more inclusive and equitable academic environment where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive and succeed. This not only benefits marginalised groups, but also enriches the academic community as a whole, fostering innovation, creativity, and excellence.

9.4 RETENTION STRATEGIES

Implementing effective retention strategies is crucial for ensuring the long-term success and advancement of talented female academics within Wits. These strategies aim to create a supportive and inclusive work environment, provide opportunities for professional development and advancement, and address issues of work-life balance. Creating a supportive and inclusive work environment is essential for retaining talented female academics. This involves fostering a culture of respect, collaboration, and belonging where individuals feel valued and empowered to contribute their unique perspectives and talents. Wits should prioritise diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, including training programs, awareness campaigns, and diversity-focused events, to promote a sense of belonging and inclusion for all members of the academic community.

Providing opportunities for professional development and advancement is another key retention strategy. Wits should offer mentorship programs, leadership development initiatives, and networking opportunities tailored to the needs of female academics. These programs help female academics build essential skills, expand their professional networks, and access resources and support to advance their careers within academia.

Addressing issues of work-life balance is critical for retaining talented female academics, many of whom may juggle multiple responsibilities both inside and outside of the workplace. Wits should implement policies and practices that support flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting, flexible scheduling, and parental leave, to accommodate the diverse needs of female academics. Additionally, providing access to affordable childcare, eldercare, and other support services can help alleviate the burden of caregiving responsibilities and promote a healthy work-life balance.

By implementing these retention strategies, Wits can create an environment where talented female academics feel valued, supported, and empowered to succeed. Retaining diverse talent within academia not only strengthens Wits' intellectual capital but also contributes to innovation, creativity, and excellence in research and scholarship.

9.5 EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Recognising the vital role that African and Coloured women play in the transformation of higher education is essential for Wits to achieve its broader educational transformation goals and contribute to nation-building efforts. African and Coloured women bring unique perspectives, experiences, and talents to academia, enriching the intellectual and cultural landscape of higher education institutions. Prioritising the support and empowerment of African and Coloured women is not only a matter of equity and social justice but also a strategic imperative for institutions seeking to foster innovation, diversity, and excellence. Wits should actively seek to create an environment where African and Coloured women feel valued, respected, and empowered to fully participate in academic life and contribute their talents and expertise to the advancement of knowledge and society.

Supporting and empowering African and Coloured women in higher education requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various dimensions of their academic and professional lives. This includes providing access to mentorship, networking opportunities, professional development initiatives, leadership training, and other resources tailored to their specific needs. Additionally, Wits should implement policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion across all aspects of academic life. This includes recruiting and retaining diverse faculty, staff, and students, as well as fostering a culture of respect, collaboration, and belonging where all members of the academic community can succeed and thrive.

By prioritising the support and empowerment of African and Coloured women, Wits can harness their potential as catalysts for educational transformation and nation-building. Investing in the success of African and Coloured women not only benefits individuals but also strengthens the overall resilience, competitiveness, and impact of Wits and contributes to the advancement of society as a whole.

9.6 SYSTEMIC CHANGES

Taking a systemic approach to address gender inequality within academia is essential for creating lasting and meaningful change. This approach involves examining and revising policies and practices that perpetuate bias and discrimination, as well as implementing proactive measures to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. One key aspect of systemic change is re-evaluating promotion and tenure criteria to ensure they are fair, transparent, and inclusive, such as mitigating gender stereotypes, unequal expectations for male and female academics, and other potential sources of bias. This may involve revising criteria to recognise and value diverse forms of scholarship, teaching, and service, as well as providing clear and consistent guidelines for evaluation.

Establishing diversity and inclusion committees is another important step in addressing gender inequality at Wits. These committees can serve as advocates for change, providing oversight, guidance, and accountability in the implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives. They can also assess institutional practices and policies to identify areas for improvement and recommend strategies for promoting equity and inclusion. Furthermore, providing training on unconscious bias is essential for raising awareness and promoting cultural competence within academia. Training programs can help faculty, staff, and administrators recognise and mitigate unconscious biases that may influence decision-making processes, such as hiring, promotion, and evaluation. By increasing awareness and understanding of bias, Wits can create a more inclusive and equitable academic environment where all members of the community have the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

By taking a systemic approach to address gender inequality within academia, Wits can create a more equitable and inclusive environment where all individuals have the opportunity to succeed based on their merits, regardless of gender. This not only benefits individuals but also strengthens the overall excellence and diversity of the academic community, leading to better outcomes for research, teaching, and service.

9.7 CONTINUOUS EVALUATION & IMPROVEMENT

Continuous evaluation and improvement are essential components of creating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment that empowers female academics. Wits should regularly assess the effectiveness of support initiatives and policies aimed at empowering female academics and make adjustments based on feedback and outcomes. Regular evaluation will allow assessment of the impact of its support initiatives and policies on the experiences and outcomes of female academics. This may involve collecting feedback from female academics through surveys, focus groups, interviews, and other feedback mechanisms to understand their experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. Wits should also analyse quantitative data, such as retention rates, promotion rates, and satisfaction levels, to assess the effectiveness of its initiatives and policies.

Based on the findings of an evaluation, Wits should make adjustments and improvements as needed to enhance the effectiveness and impact of its support initiatives and policies. This may include revising policies, reallocating resources, expanding program offerings, or implementing new initiatives to meet the needs of female academics and address emerging challenges. In addition to regular evaluation, Wits should also prioritise transparency and communication throughout the evaluation and improvement process. This includes sharing findings with stakeholders, soliciting input and feedback, and communicating updates and changes to support initiatives and policies. By involving stakeholders in the evaluation and improvement process, Wits could foster a sense of ownership and accountability and ensure that support initiatives and policies are responsive to the needs of female academics.

By implementing continuous evaluation and improvement processes, Wits can create a more responsive, adaptive, and effective support system for female academics. This not only benefits female academics but also contributes to the overall excellence, diversity, and inclusivity of the academic community.

9.8 COLLABORATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing among institutions is crucial for identifying best practices and innovative approaches to support female academics and advance gender equity in higher education. By working together and sharing experiences, institutions can learn from each other, leverage collective expertise, and develop strategies that are more effective and impactful. Participating in networks and consortia dedicated to advancing gender equity in higher education is a valuable way for institutions to collaborate and share knowledge. These networks provide a platform for institutions to exchange ideas, resources, and successful initiatives related to supporting female academics and promoting gender equity. They also offer opportunities for collaboration on research projects, advocacy efforts, and professional development programs.

Through collaboration and knowledge sharing, institutions can identify best practices and innovative approaches that can be adapted and implemented within their own contexts. This may include strategies for recruiting and retaining female faculty, creating inclusive work environments, addressing unconscious bias, and promoting work-life balance. Furthermore, collaboration and knowledge sharing can amplify the impact of individual institutions' efforts by fostering collective action and advocacy for systemic change. By working together, institutions can advocate for policy changes, funding initiatives, and institutional reforms that promote gender equity and create more inclusive and supportive academic environments for female academics.

Overall, fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing among institutions is essential for advancing gender equity in higher education and supporting the success of female academics. By leveraging collective expertise and resources, institutions can accelerate progress towards gender equity goals and create a more inclusive and equitable academic community for all.

10. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the transformative impact of the FALF program in addressing specific gaps within the academic landscape. Through initiatives such as mentorship, support networks, and skill-building opportunities, the FALF has effectively empowered female academics, leading to positive outcomes such as enhanced academic profiles and fruitful collaborations. These outcomes not only advance individual careers but also cultivate a community of female academics who contribute meaningfully to their disciplines and society.

This study highlights the pivotal role of local interventions like the FALF in tackling the multifaceted challenges encountered by female academics. By providing mentorship, support networks, and skill-building opportunities, initiatives like the FALF contribute to the advancement of gender equity and the promotion of diversity in academic settings worldwide. Moreover, by contextualising the experiences of fellows within the broader discourse on gender disparities in academic leadership, this research emphasises the importance of local interventions in addressing systemic challenges.

By examining the fellows' positive experiences, this study not only sheds light on the challenges faced by female academics within the specific context of South Africa but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the broader systemic issues of gender inequality within academia globally. Through initiatives like the FALF, strides can be made towards creating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment, both locally and globally, ultimately fostering a culture of diversity and excellence in higher education.

APPENDIX A: FELLOWS' ACADEMIC RANK PER FACULTY, 2021–2023[117]

ACADEMIC RANK	HUMANITIES			SCIENCE			HEALTH SCIENCES			ENGINEERING AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT			COMMERCE, LAW, AND MANAGEMENT		
	2023	2022	2021	2023	2022	2021	2023	2022	2021	2023	2022	2021	2023	2022	2021
Post-doctoral Fellow	1	1	1					1							
Associate Lecturer							1								
Lecturer	2	5	2	1	2	1	5	1	4	1			2	2	4
Senior Lecturer	2	2	4	2	1	1	1	5	1	4	1				
Researcher Senior							1						2		
Researcher				1	3	1	1			1					
Associate Professor	1	1													
Director / Head of Department	2	2					2						1		
TOTAL	**5**	**10**	**7**	**3**	**3**	**3**	**4**	**12**	**12**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**4**	**1**	**3**

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The B-BBEE Act 53 of 2003 defines African people as Africans, Coloureds, and Indians/Asians who are South African citizens by birth or descent or who became citizens by naturalization before 27 April 1994, or on or after that date, but who would have been entitled to acquire citizenship by naturalization prior to that date.

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