



Systematic Review of Women's Leadership Development Programme in South African Public Universities: Focus Areas, Effectiveness, and Gaps

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Abstract

Women's leadership development programmes (WLDPs) play an essential role in empowering women to move into leadership positions. Despite the obstacles that limit women's participation in higher education leadership positions that have been well studied, little is known about the WLDPs in South African academia. This study aims to explore the focus areas, effectiveness, and gaps in existing WLDPs in South African public universities. To this end, the study adopted a qualitative research approach. The review documents were screened using the PRISMA (2020) guideline. In this review, a total of (n = 43) documents were reviewed, which comprised (n = 24) WLDP documents and (n = 19) past studies. The research results demonstrated that a majority of the institutional-level WLDPs tend to address perceived individual deficiencies in women. The study findings further highlighted that there is a limited emphasis on the intersectional dynamics, along with an absence of institutionalized support for WLDPs. The study concludes that institutional WLDPs fix women's skill deficiencies at the institutional level rather than tackling systemic barriers present within institutions. Furthermore, the study concludes that poor integration of women's intersectional realities in the programme and a lack of continued support hinder the overall effectiveness of these initiatives.

Keywords: programme; WLDPs; initiatives; women; empower; South Africa

1. Introduction and Rationale

Women's Leadership Development Programmes (WLDPs) are essential for bringing about change in the higher education sector (Correa et al. 2025). WLDPs provide an important contribution at both the individual and organizational levels. On a personal level, WLDPs boost women's self-efficacy in leadership roles and build their confidence in communication (Herbst et al. 2024). Another critical aspect of WLDPs is their role in fostering strategic skill development and facilitating career progression. WLDPs equip female faculty in the early to mid-stages of their careers with specific and practical skills that are vital for navigating the academic hierarchy (Lee et al. 2024). Moreover, WLDPs promote peer connections, mentorship opportunities, and retention through nurturing inclusive institutional policies and practices (Lee et al. 2024). At the organization level, WLDPs serve as one of the most important elements in breaking down deep-rooted structural and patriarchal obstacles (Correa et al. 2025).

After the Apartheid regime ended, South Africa established a democratic state to meet the various needs of its citizens. One important reform was the promise to ensure



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gender equality in workplaces and schools (Singh, Karishma, Tshali Ntombizanele, Afika-Amazizi.Naledi Mbuyiswa, and Portia Nokubonga Mseleku. 2024. *Evolution of South African women in higher education: Past, present, future*). In South Africa, population estimates show that there are more women than men. According to the most recent mid-year population estimates for 2024, about 51% (32,129,704) are female, while 49% (30,886,200) are male (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 2024). Similarly, this trend is also observed among university students and staff members. At public universities in South Africa, over half of all students are women. However, they are not moving into leadership roles (Moodly and Fouten 2026). Additionally, women make up 54% of university staff, but this pattern does not apply to senior levels of university leadership (Pillay 2025).

South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) continue to exhibit significant patriarchal structures and social stratification (Mankayi and Cheteni 2021). Consequently, women's participation in senior leadership position is remained still low, though women's university enrolment, academic and professional, are high as compared with their male counterparts (Pillay 2025). In 2022, for example, South Africa's public universities had only 6 women vice-chancellors out of 26 positions, highlighting that women are not advancing to senior academic leadership at the same rate as their male counterparts, who occupy the remaining 20 positions (Kuagbedzi et al. 2023; Mbukanma and Strydom 2022).

To address this challenge, several WLDPs have been introduced at South African HEIs (Herbst et al. 2024). Despite an underestimated number of WLDPs being in place, these initiatives in South African HEIs currently tend to suffer from a lack of conceptual coherence, often prioritizing the enhancement of individual women's behavioral characteristics, instead of addressing the entrenched, gendered structures of universities (Herbst et al. 2024; Moodly and Toni 2017).

In the existing available literature, little is known about WLDPs in South African HEIs. Most prior studies heavily focused on the barriers that limit women from accessing leadership positions (e.g., Kaymakcioglu and Thomas 2024; Oliso and Simelane-Mnisi 2026; Pillay 2025). None of the past studies comprehensively studied WLDPs within South African academia. The main purpose of this study was to thoroughly investigate the focus areas, effectiveness, and gaps of the existing WLDPs by adopting feminist institutionalism and transformational leadership theories. Investigating the contribution of WLDPs at the individual and organizational level is essential to ensure gender parity in the higher education sector. If the effectiveness of WLDPs is not thoroughly researched and addressed, achieving gender equity in upper leadership positions will be remarkably difficult within academia.

The current study findings contribute their share to the existing body of knowledge in advancing the role of WLDPs within South African HEIs. The study findings also have several practical significances. The study findings assist the universities in reviewing their existing WLDPs and taking necessary actions to improve the initiatives. The review findings also contribute a lot for women academic staff, as they provide the effectiveness and gaps of the WLDPs within academia. The review findings also contribute their share to education policy and decision-makers to learn more about WLDPs' effectiveness and gaps that persist in South African public universities, and take necessary measures and interventions. The main objectives of this review are to:

- I. Identify the primary focus areas of current WLDPs in South African public universities
- II. Investigate the effectiveness of WLDPs in relation to individual career advancement and overall institutional change
- III. Explore gaps in the existing WLDPs in South African HEIs

2. Theoretical Framework

The current study was mainly guided by Feminist Institutionalism Theory (FIT) and was supported by Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT). Rather than assuming a seamless alignment between these two perspectives, this study explicitly draws upon the conceptual tension between FIT's structural orientation and TLT's individual orientation to evaluate WLDPs in South African HEIs. In this study, FIT serves as the primary lens to examine how university environments, such as formal policies, informal norms, and organizational cultures, have historically privileged male pathways to senior leadership (Mackay et al. 2010). In this review, FIT offers a valuable perspective for examining how WLDPs tackle institutional barriers and whether they help change gendered power structures in universities.

To evaluate the micro-level behaviors that are targeted by the existing WLDPs, the study utilizes TLT (Bass 1985). This approach focuses on behavioral outcomes, including inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence. It offers a framework for mapping the specific leadership competencies, psychological capital, and individual agency that are currently intended to be developed in the WLDP curricula. We recognize a fundamental theoretical tension: TLT is a framework focused on agency that emphasizes transformation as an individual behavioral issue, while FIT challenges individualistic approaches and identifies the problem within gendered institutional frameworks. We purposefully utilize both perspectives since current South African WLDPs function exactly at this intersection. While TLT outlines the aimed training of most WLDPs promoting personal resilience, emotional awareness, and transformative behaviors, FIT offers the necessary critical perspective to illustrate why an approach solely based on TLT is insufficient. By utilizing both frameworks, this review not only articulates what WLDPs accomplish; it also systematically reveals the conceptual misalignment between programs designed with an individual focus and the structural institutional obstacles.

3. Methodology

3.1. Review Design, Paradigm, and Approach

This study adopted a systematic review design to identify focus areas, effectiveness, and gaps of WLDPs in South African HEIs. The study's design was positioned within an interpretivist research framework, as it suggests that reality is socially constructed and complex and prioritizes qualitative, contextualized understandings of phenomena (Hatch 2023). Rather than prioritizing statistical aggregation, this qualitative method facilitates an in-depth and nuanced analysis of the existing WLDPs within South African HEIs. The employed method assisted us in closely investigating and summarizing the focus areas, effectiveness, and gaps of various WLDPs reported in prior studies and official WLDP documents. To ensure transparency and scientific rigor, the implementation of this systematic review strictly adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines (Page et al. 2021). The PRISMA framework offers a consistent and transparent four-phase flow process: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion that reduces researcher bias and enhances the study's worth to evidence-based academic policy (Selcuk 2019). To operationalize the search strategy and establish clear boundaries for the extant literature search, the PEO (Population, Exposure, Outcome) framework was employed, because it is instrumental in defining clear inclusion and exclusion criteria and mapping search terms or keywords (Van der Waldt 2025).

3.2. Search Strategy and Data Sources

In this study, we reviewed WLDPs that have been run by South African public universities and peer-reviewed journal articles to make our systematic review more comprehensive.

Legal documents associated with WLDPs were accessed via institutional repositories to address the first research objective, which intended to explore the available WLDPs at the institutional, national, and partnership levels with other international organizations or countries, including their focus areas. On the other hand, peer-reviewed journal articles were extracted via electronic databases to address the second and third research objectives, which are aimed at investigating the effectiveness of women's leadership development initiatives and their gaps. In this study, peer-reviewed journal articles were accessed via five well-known electronic databases, and these encompass Sabinet African Journals, Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC.

We developed search terms or keywords as per the PEO framework. These include: Population (P): "women" OR "female", "gender" OR "woman", "higher education" OR "university", Exposure/Process: "leadership development" OR "leadership programme", "leadership training" OR "capacity building", "management training" OR "career development", "mentorship programme" OR "coaching initiative", Outcome (O): "focus area" OR "curriculum", "content" OR "theme", "skill building" OR "competence", "mentorship" OR "networking", "effectiveness" OR "impact", "gap" OR "challenge". Once the selection of key terms has been completed, we developed a search string/query, which combines Boolean operators (OR, AND). We used OR group synonyms within a concept and AND to join the different concepts together (Rethlefsen et al. 2021). For example, "women OR female" AND "higher education" OR "university". At the end, we refined the search strategy as we employed different electronic databases to search past studies. Thus, we followed search strategy adaptation or translation to fit the specific syntax of each platform while maintaining the keywords the same (Bramer et al. 2018). Regarding WLDP documents or grey literature, we conducted a targeted search for information to mitigate publication bias, which involved manual searches via institutional repositories (Mahood et al. 2021).

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In this review, we briefly defined the inclusion and exclusion criteria for WLDP documents and prior peer-reviewed studies using the PEO framework, along with other necessary criteria such as publication language, study design, and timeframe. We targeted WLDP documents designed to empower women's leadership capacity at South African public universities. Regarding the reviewed journal articles, studies focusing explicitly on WLDPs within the South African HEIs were considered (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Reviewed Legal WLDP Documents		
Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population/Context	-WLDP documents designed for South African HEIs	-WLDP documents designed outside South African HEIs
Exposure/Focus	-WLDP documents, which have clear focus areas	-WLDP documents, which have no clear focus areas
Language	-WLDPs documents published in the English language	-WLDP documents published in other languages
Timeframe	-Recent, updated, and active WLDP documents/programmes	-Old documents/programmes and not in active status
Population/Context	-Studies focusing explicitly on women (academic or professional staff) within the South African HEIs	-Studies focusing entirely on primary or secondary education leadership, or business or higher education outside of South Africa

Table 1. *Cont.*

Criteria	Reviewed prior studies	
	Inclusion	Exclusion
Exposure/focus	-Studies examining WLDPs	-Studies that do not examine WLDPs
Outcomes	-Studies evaluate the WLDP's focus areas, effectiveness, and gaps	-Studies that do not reflect the WLDP's focus areas, effectiveness, and gaps
Study designs	-Peer-reviewed journal articles, which employed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods, and comprehensive systematic reviews	-Conference papers, book chapters, papers lacking methodological strength, not peer-reviewed journal articles
Language	-Publications written in the English language	-Publications in other languages
Timeframe	Covering between 2017 and 2026	-Publications before 2017

Source: authors' own work.

3.4. Data Screening

As mentioned earlier, the data selection process was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guideline (Page et al. 2021). All records identified during the electronic database search and institutional repositories were exported to the Mendeley citation management software, v. 2.145.0, where duplicates were manually removed. The remaining records underwent a two-stage screening process. In the first stage, two reviewers of this study independently screened the titles and abstracts of all identified records against the pre-established inclusion and exclusion criteria. The first reviewer is men educational management scholar specializing in educational policy and leadership, with rich experience in thematic synthesis and systematic reviews. The second reviewer is a well-known woman scholar in technology integration in education, an instructional designer, and women's leadership in the era of Artificial Intelligence (AI), with experience in qualitative research. Each reviewer independently screened titles and abstracts, followed by a consensus meeting to resolve discrepancies. In the second stage, a full-text review was conducted. Studies deemed potentially eligible or ambiguous during the first stage were retrieved in full text and evaluated independently by the reviewers. Any discrepancies or disagreements regarding study inclusion at either stage were resolved through consensus. The entire selection flow, including reasons for the exclusion of full-text articles, was documented and visually presented using a PRISMA flow diagram.

In this review, an initial search produced a total of (n = 280) documents, consisting of (n = 95) WLDP documents and (n = 185) past studies addressing issues associated with the WLDPs. All WLDP documents were accessed via institutional repositories. Past studies were accessed from five well-known databases: Sabinet African Journals (n = 75), Google Scholar (n = 52), Scopus (n = 15), Web of Science (n = 25), and ERIC (n = 18). After removing a total of (n = 142) duplicates, (n = 45) WLDP documents, and (n = 97) past studies, (n = 138) records, comprising (n = 50) WLDP documents and (n = 88) past studies, remained for screening. During the initial record screening, (n = 10) WLDPs documents that do not meet our basic standard and (n = 58) studies were excluded (primarily those published before 2017).

Afterwards, (n = 40) WLDP documents and (n = 30) articles totally (n = 70) documents, were sought for retrieval. Of these, full document access was denied for (n = 2) WLDP documents and (n = 3) past studies. The remaining (n = 65) documents, comprising (n = 38) WLDP documents and (n = 27) journal articles, were then assessed for eligibility based on their alignment with our research focus. Based on the assessment for eligibility

with research focus, (n = 14) WLDPs documents that do not focus on women's leadership initiatives and (n = 8) past studies that do not focus on our study objectives were excluded from inclusion. Finally, a total of (n = 24) WLDP documents, consisting of institutional level (n = 13), national level (n = 6), and partnership (n = 5), and (n = 19) past studies, a total of (n = 43) documents were included in the final review (see Figure 1).

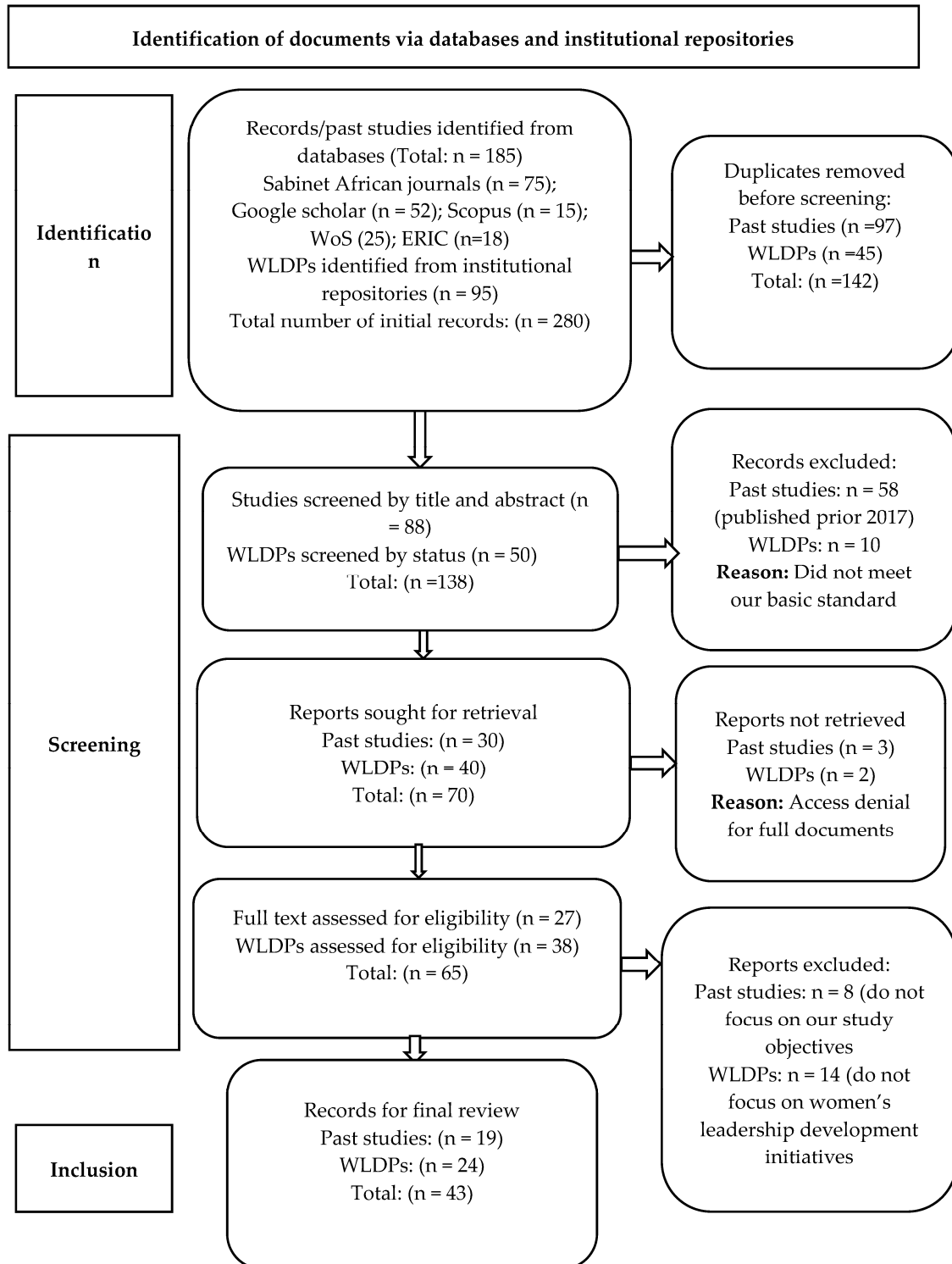


Figure 1. Summary of PRISMA chart flow. Source: Authors' own work as per the PRISMA 2020 guideline.

3.5. Data Extraction Process

During the data extraction process, we developed a standardized data extraction form in Microsoft Excel for both included WLDPs and past studies to ensure consistency and reliability. Data extraction was conducted by the primary author of this study and cross-checked for accuracy by a co-author. The following data items were extracted from each included study. These include the author(s), year of publication, adopted methodology, sample size, data collection tools, and key findings on the effectiveness and gaps of the WLDPs (See Supplementary Materials SM1). Similarly, data items were extracted from each included WLDP document. These encompass programme types, target groups, focus areas, programme duration, programme status, model of delivery, and institution(s) that run the programme (See Supplementary Materials SM2–SM4). Upon the completion of the data extraction process, we thoroughly evaluated the quality of included documents to minimize the reviewers' bias as detailed hereunder.

3.6. Critical Quality Appraisal and Risk of Bias Assessment

In this study, a rigorous critical appraisal was performed to evaluate the internal validity, methodological quality, and minimize reviewer subjectivity and eliminate potential interpretation bias of the included studies and WLDPs (Booth et al. 2016). Given the anticipated diversity in the designs of included studies, the study adopted the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 framework (Hong et al. 2018). Accordingly, first, we ensured whether the included studies have clear research questions and whether the collected data allowed for addressing the posed questions. Next, we mapped our included ($n = 21$) studies into four categories as per the methodology adopted as follows: category 1: qualitative study, category 2: quantitative non-randomized, category 3: quantitative descriptive, and category 4: mixed methods. Afterwards, we closely checked and scored the methodological appropriateness, interpretation, and findings of each included study using the following response options: Yes, No, and I can not tell, and provided a detailed description for our choice.

On the other hand, the included WLDP documents were appraised using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal checklists, as it is recognized as an important tool to evaluate non-research textual documents (Zeng et al. 2015). To maintain methodological rigor, both the primary author and the co-author of this study appraised each document. We thoroughly read the WLDPs and applied the JBI questions blindly. We carefully reviewed WLDP ($n = 24$) documents and scored the context of the programme, focus areas, and status of each included document using the set response options: Yes (Y), No (N), Unclear (U), or Not Applicable (NA), and provided a detailed description for our choice. Finally, any discrepancies or conflicting quality scores between the two reviewers were resolved through collaborative discussion, and we reached consensus (Boutron et al. 2023).

3.7. Data Synthesis and Analysis

Since the included WLDP documents and journal articles encompass diverse reporting and study designs, a meta-analysis can not be feasible. Consequently, in this study, we employed narrative/thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The analysis followed a multi-step process. First, we familiarized ourselves with the extracted data through iterative reading of the findings. To this end, we closely reviewed the included WLDPs documents and peer-reviewed journal articles against our research objectives. The primary and co-author thoroughly evaluated the included WLDPs' document focus areas. In addition, both authors thoroughly evaluated the included journal articles' findings regarding WLDPs' effectiveness and their gaps. We modified a single-column

word processor on our personal computer and entered all the review findings from the printed version.

Next, we pinpointed the key related categories by marking them with various colors. Afterwards, we thoroughly analyzed and assessed the marked ideas or categories to see if the related concepts were grouped together or if the current concepts were broken down into sub-categories. Once the review of the identification of categories and sub-categories has been completed, the coding process was started. Accordingly, we generated initial codes directly mapped to the study's primary objectives. To ensure methodological rigor and reduce the likelihood of researcher bias in the thematic analysis, a hybrid (inductive and deductive) coding approach was followed. The primary author developed the initial codes and emerging themes, which were then independently evaluated and validated by a co-author. Any discrepancies in data extraction and theme classification were resolved through continuous discussions and mutual agreement until a final thematic framework was established. This collaborative review served as a method of intercoder validation, enhancing the conceptual depth and dependability of the synthesized findings.

Afterwards, we organized codes into overarching descriptive themes that categorize the focus areas, indicators of effectiveness, and prominent structural or institutional gaps in existing WLDPs. Following the completion of this categorization process, theme validation was undertaken. The theme validation involved a two-stage review procedure to ensure conceptual consistency and rigor. First, the emerging themes were compared with the original extracted data to verify that they faithfully represented the findings reported in the source literature. Second, the finalized thematic structure was evaluated in relation to the study's primary research objectives to establish the relevance, internal consistency, and validity of the synthesized themes. Finally, the validated data were thoroughly described, interpreted, and analyzed using a thematic approach.

4. Results and Discussion

This section deals with the results and discussion, along with thematic analysis to meet the three research objectives posed earlier.

4.1. Theme 1: Available WLDPs and Their Focus Areas

Existing WLDPs at the institutional level: The institutional-level WLDPs at South African public universities are designed around three interrelated pillars. These are academic progression, behavioral leadership enhancement, and structural change. Viewed through the lens of feminist institutionalism, programmes provided at some institutions, such as the University of Pretoria, Rhodes University, and North-West University, directly challenge male-dominated institutional norms by fostering the academic pipeline through building research capacity, mentorship, and readiness for promotion training (Mackay et al. 2010). At the same time, aligned with transformational leadership theories, programs offered through various business schools, namely the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town, and Stellenbosch University, equip women with vital interpersonal and strategic executive skills, such as emotional intelligence, negotiation, strategic networking, and balancing dual-career issues (Bass and Avolio 1994). Table 2 summarizes the reviewed institutional-level WLDPs.

Table 2. Summary of the reviewed institutional-level WLDPs.

Major Theme One: Available WLDPs and Their Focus Areas	Type of the Programmes	Focus Areas	Institution(s) Run the Programme
Sub-theme 1.1: WLDPs at the institutional-level	Women as Leaders	-Workplace paradigm, emotional intelligence, and bias	University of Pretoria (UP), Gordon Institute of Business Science
	Women Leadership Programme (WLP)	-Fostering transformation agency, institutional equity alignment, advanced research capacity building, and navigating the academic pipeline	UP, Albert Luthuli Leadership Institute (ALLI), in partnership with GIBS.
	Accelerated Academic Mentorship Programme (AAMP)	-Academic leadership, research productivity, career advancement, mentorship	UP
	Women in Leadership Programme (WLP)	-Leadership competencies, gender transformation, management skills, succession planning	University of South Africa
	Women in Leadership (WiL)	-Workplace paradigm, self-awareness, negotiation, and conflict resolution	University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Business School Executive Education
	Developing Women in Leadership	-Strategic networking, and managing the dual-career challenge	University of Cape Town, Graduate School of Business
	Women in Leadership	-Building social capital, diversity and inclusion, and institutional obstacles	Stellenbosch University, Business School Executive Development
	GROW	-Mentorship, research capacity training, and leadership development	North-West University (Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences)
	Women's Leadership Programme	-Leadership development, career planning, institutional governance, and gender equity	University of KwaZulu-Natal
	Women in Leadership Development Initiative	-Leadership capability, confidence building, strategic management, and networking	Nelson Mandela University
	Women in Leadership Programme	-Transformational leadership, career advancement, institutional culture change	University of the Free State
	Women's Leadership and Mentoring Initiatives	-Leadership competencies, mentorship, succession planning, and gender transformation	University of Johannesburg
	Women's Academic Advancement Programme	-Academic leadership, promotion readiness, research leadership, mentorship	Rhodes University

Source: authors' own work. Where; HELM = Higher Education Leadership and Management; GROW = Gender Responsive Opportunities for Women.

Although one of the core pillars of WLDP is structural change, several studies discovered that institution-based WLDPs focus on individual capacity-building, neglecting systemic barriers and institutional culture change. WLDPs typically failed to notice or

regard the intersectional issues related to race and the distinct institutional history that comes with post-apartheid South Africa. The existing institutional-level WLDPs adopt a corporate approach; they often wrongly perceive women as a uniform category (Scheepers et al. 2018). By doing so, these initiatives overlook how intersectionality factors, such as race, systemic racism, and the differing historical contexts of predominantly white versus historically marginalized universities, contribute to distinct challenges faced by Black women in South Africa in comparison to their white peers (Seale et al. 2021). In the absence of a systematic synthesis of these initiatives, institutions may continue to pour resources into human capital strategies that do not effectively challenge the prevailing glass ceiling (Kela et al. 2024).

Existing available WLDPs at the National level: a detailed look at national WLDPs in South African HEIs shows a strategic, overall approach to gender change. When analyzed through the dual lenses of feminist institutionalism and transformational leadership theories, this approach shifts the focus from fixing women's presumed leadership skill deficiency to the system and institutional framework (Bass and Avolio 1994; Mackay et al. 2010). The national programmes, mainly led by Universities South Africa (USAf), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), and Higher Education Resource Services (HERS-SA), effectively place women's leadership within the complex governance of the higher education sector. Unlike local initiatives, these national efforts target major challenges directly, such as university funding, resource management, institutional governance (including senates and councils), and policy execution. Programmes such as Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM), Women in Leadership Programme (WiLP), and USAf's gender mainstreaming initiatives work well because they focus on systemic change, collective leadership based on values, and intentionally changing institutional cultures. Additionally, HERS-SA's two-part approach separates the academy, which addresses overall power dynamics and executive management strategies, from the Emerging Women Leaders Programme, which emphasizes career planning, professional identity, and resilience. This creates a clear pathway for leadership development throughout a woman's academic journey. Table 3 portrays the national-level WLDPs.

Table 3. Summary of the reviewed national-level WLDPs.

Sub-Theme 1.2: WLDPs at the National Level	Type of the Programmes	Focus Areas	Institution(s) Run the Programme
	HELM: Women in Leadership Programme (WiLP)	Systemic transformation, navigating complex institutional environments, values-based and collective leadership, and institutional management. Includes the submission of a reflective portfolio	-USAf, DHET, and the British Council, certified by Nelson Mandela University
	HERS-SA Academy	Higher education governance, macro-level university funding, institutional resource management, strategic self-leadership, and managing complex power dynamics.	HERS-SA
	HERS-SA Emerging Women Leaders Programme (EWLP)	Career planning, establishing a personal research/professional identity, practicing self-care/resilience in a gendered workspace, and understanding fundamental university processes.	HERS-SA

Table 3. *Cont.*

Sub-Theme 1.2: WLDPs at the National Level	Type of the Programmes	Focus Areas	Institution(s) Run the Programme
	The Women in Leadership Masterclass	-Social capital and digital presence, councils and senates	-National Programme hosted by Stellenbosch Business School
	GROW Leadership Development Programme	Leadership development, management skills, institutional transformation, succession planning	USAf and partner institutions
	Gender Mainstreaming and Women's Leadership Initiatives	Gender transformation, leadership development, institutional change, policy implementation	USAf Community of Practice and Transformation Structures

Source: authors' own work.

Existing available WLDPs in partnership with international organizations: an analysis of the WLDPs with external and international partners shows a shift towards global benchmarking, cross-border networking, and focused capacity building. Collaborative efforts with well-known international organizations, such as the UK's Advance HE (Aurora Programme) and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) include global best practices in higher education governance, strategic influence, and leadership identity. Understood through feminist institutionalism, these international associations act as a form of transnational influence (Mackay et al. 2010). By aligning South African higher education with global best practices and external funding partners, for example, the British Council and the U.S. Department of State, through the Mandela Washington Fellowship and Fulbright Programme, create specialized pathways for research leadership in male-dominated fields of study, mainly Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), public and civic leadership, and academic management. By connecting South African institutions to global networks, these partnered programmes go beyond local training. They position South African women as influential leaders connected to the world, able to drive systemic change and foster international collaboration. Table 4 recaps the WLDPs with external/international partners.

Table 4. Summary of the reviewed WLDPs with external/international partners.

Sub-Theme 1.3: WLDPs with International Partners	Type of the Programme	Focus Areas	Partner Institution(s)	External Partner(s)
	Advance HE: Aurora Programme	Leadership identity, confidence building, career advancement, strategic influence, mentoring	Universities such as Stellenbosch University, University of Cape Town, University of Johannesburg, and others	Advance HE United Kingdom (UK)
	The British Council: Women in STEM Scholarships and Leadership Initiatives	Research leadership, academic career development, gender equity in STEM, international collaboration	Multiple South African universities	British Council UK

Table 4. Cont.

Sub-Theme 1.3: WLDPs with International Partners	Type of the Programme	Focus Areas	Partner Institution(s)	External Partner(s)
	The Mandela Washington Fellowship (Young African Leaders Initiative—YALI)	Public leadership, civic leadership, entrepreneurship, change leadership, networking	South African universities may host activities or support fellows	U.S. Department of State
	Commonwealth Women's Leadership Programme	Leadership development, gender equality, higher education governance, and networking	South African public universities participating through the ACU network	Association of Commonwealth Universities UK
	Fulbright Specialist and Leadership Programmes	Academic leadership, HE management, international networking	South African universities	Fulbright Program (USA)

Source: authors' own work.

4.2. Theme 2: Effectiveness of WLDPs

Improved women's self-confidence and leadership identity: Earlier studies discovered that the WLDPs helped women academics to overcome internalized stereotypes and gender biases, which affect their self-efficacy. The institutional-level WLDPs mainly enhanced the self-confidence of women and the ability to find their voice in traditionally masculine institutional cultures (Herbst et al. 2024). Moreover, another study conducted by Mbokota and Reid (2022) found that the institutional-level WLDPs improved the sense of self-awareness and relationship with an authentic self, allowing women to lead without feeling forced to firmly adopt masculine leadership styles. Evaluating the training's psychological impact on women from the perspective of transformational leadership theory is essential, as the theory contends that leadership roles require high levels of emotional intelligence, self-assurance, and psychological capital (Bass and Avolio 1994). However, personal empowerment does not happen in isolation; it inevitably interacts with the institutional structure. Feminist institutionalism highlights that higher education settings are not neutral regarding gender. Rather, they are filled with traditionally masculine institutional cultures and informal norms that associate leadership with male models (Mackay et al. 2010). Thus, the real strength of WLDPs lies in their ability to connect individual autonomy with institutional analysis (Mbokota and Reid 2022).

Developed women's core management skills and social competencies: beyond psychological impact, studies found that the institutional-level WLDPs contributed a lot to the acquisition of core management and robust social competencies for high-level academic administration. The most important finding is that WLDPs provide the technical and interpersonal toolkit necessary to navigate complex institutional environments. For example, Seale et al. (2021) demonstrate that institutional interventions like HELM successfully equip women with critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills tailored to the nuances of the South African HEIs setting. When we viewed these findings through the theoretical lens of feminist institutionalism, they had significant structural implications. Traditionally, institutional governance has depended on gendered gatekeeping, often driven by the belief that women did not have the necessary technical skills to perform leadership roles (Mackay et al. 2010). By making these essential administrative skills more accessible and formalized, WLDPs dismantle informal institutional barriers that hinder women's access to leadership positions. Another study conducted by Mbokota and Reid

(2022) further found that WLDPs effectively build social competence, improving women's ability to empower others and manage complex relationships within diverse teams. The balance between technical execution and relationship building fits well with transformational leadership theory because this framework contends that long-term organizational change comes not from forceful, top-down orders but from working together, building trust, and sharing a common vision (Bass and Avolio 1994; Eagly and Carli 2007).

Reduced women's isolation barriers: among several barriers that set women back from accessing senior leadership positions, the glass ceiling and their exclusion from informal networks are the major ones in South African HEIs (Kela et al. 2024). Recent research findings indicated that WLDPs provided at the university or institutional-level serve as crucial networking hubs, providing the mentorship and peer support that women often lack compared to their male counterparts (Kela et al. 2024; Pillay 2025). When analyzed this finding through transformational leadership theory, the mentorship and collective peer networks incorporated within WLDPs produced the necessary social capital that enables women to successfully transition into executive governance (Eagly and Carli 2007). In addition, the efficacy of WLDPs like HELM-WiL lies in equipping women with the collective power required for leadership positions via dismantling the unseen institutional barriers, which are exposed by feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al. 2010).

4.3. Theme 3: Gaps in the Existing WLDPs

Fixing women's perceived individual deficiencies (assimilationist logic): despite WLDPs having brought significant improvements in women's personal development, studies explored that institutional-level WLDPs have gaps in long-term effectiveness in achieving gender parity at senior leadership roles within South African academia. One of the major criticisms of the existing institutional-level WLDPs is their tendency to focus on fixing perceived individual deficiencies in women. For example, studies conducted by Toni and Moodly (2019) and Seale et al. (2021) found that the institutional-level WLDPs build personal confidence, assertiveness, and negotiation skills rather than addressing deep-rooted systematic barriers and invisible patriarchal cultures of the universities. When analyzed through the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, this problem is rooted in a fundamental misalignment in the understanding of leadership development. Existing institution-based WLDPs often adhere to an assimilationist logic, presuming that the academic environment is a neutral ground for all genders. As a result, these initiatives tend to concentrate on addressing perceived deficiencies in women, such as a lack of self-assurance or negotiation abilities, based on the belief that women simply require more competitive resilience to succeed within the current leadership positions and system.

The study findings of Toni and Moodly (2019) and Seale et al. (2021) further demonstrated that individual-focused strategy fundamentally misinterpret the issue by neglecting to consider what feminist institutionalists describe as the gendered substructure of organizations, an essential concept indicating that institutional practices, perceptions, and power distributions are inherently structured around masculine standards rather than being gender-neutral (Acker 1990). By prioritizing individual skill-building, the university-level WLDPs aimed at developing leadership skills frequently overlook the specific obstacles encountered by women, which stem from entrenched gender biases, male-centered organizational structures, and cultures that foster exclusion (Seale et al. 2021). Furthermore, progressive institutional policies and associated women's leadership development initiatives can unintentionally reinforce biases and stereotypes that sustain patriarchal leadership frameworks (Pillay 2025). The empirical results of this review illustrate the theoretical tension between FIT and TLT. The majority of WLDPs in South African higher education institutions are framed through a TLT perspective, with the assumption that fostering

transformative qualities in individual women will lead to progress within institutions. However, from an FIT standpoint, these institution-based initiatives are revealed to be insufficient. By concentrating primarily on changes at the individual behavior level, existing institutional-level WLDPs inadvertently perpetuate the ‘fix-the-woman’ mindset, preparing individuals to navigate gendered institutions without challenging the institutional rules, informal networks, and cultural norms that uphold inequality.

Inadequate focus on intersectional dynamics and daily operational realities: apart from the wider systemic obstacles, a significant limitation of current WLDPs in South African universities is their inadequate focus on intersectional factors. Institution-based WLDPs frequently fail to consider how overlapping identities such as race, motherhood, marital status, cultural, and familial obligations interact to create distinct, cumulative obstacles that disproportionately affect certain groups of women striving for advancement into senior leadership positions (Mbatha and Ruiters 2024). When assessed through Crenshaw’s (1989) Intersectionality Theory along with Acker’s (1990) Feminist Institutionalism framework, WLDPs seem to regard women as a uniform group, neglecting the complex and intersectional realities of women’s lives. Consequently, structural barriers like rigid working hours, severe work-family tensions, and unequal domestic caregiving responsibilities are neglected by conventional leadership approaches (Kela et al. 2024).

In the absence of structural adjustments to workload allocation and promotion standards, the skills acquired in these programmes cannot be effectively utilized (Akala 2018; Kela et al. 2024). When we look at this finding through the lens of feminist institutionalism, the disconnect shows how formal equity measures often get weakened by strong informal norms (Mackay et al. 2010). The university sticks to the outdated idea of the gender-neutral ideal worker, which assumes that academics do not have domestic responsibilities or conflicts between family and work (Acker 1990). Because institutional-level WLDPs do not challenge or change these gendered structures, like rigid working hours and heavy home responsibilities, they ignore the everyday barriers in the institution (Akala 2018). This lack of progress shows a failure to bring about real change within the institution. According to transformation theory, true organizational change requires moving beyond simple, first-order adjustments like short-term workshops or random training sessions. It needs deep, second-order structural changes (Eckel and Kezar 2003). Current WLDPs act as isolated, superficial fixes that try to improve individual skills without challenging the existing system. This creates a frustrating cycle: women gain skills in separate training sessions, but they return to a workplace where workload distribution and promotion criteria stay the same, often penalizing those who take on caregiving roles (Kela et al. 2024).

Lack of sustained and institutionalized Support: despite WLDPs under USAf/HELM offering high-quality mentorship, university-level WLDPs tend to function as irregular, short-term workshops and modular courses instead of providing ongoing career development pathways. Several university-level women’s leadership development initiatives struggle due to a lack of sustained institutional support (Kela et al. 2024; Khumalo and Zhou 2019; Msiza 2026; Seale et al. 2021; Shwababa et al. 2023). The lack of support from institutions or executives shows that women may get advice on structure, but the main networks that control the university are largely male-dominated. Viewed through the lens of feminist institutionalism, this operational failure shows an important difference between giving formal advice and the informal distribution of power (Mackay et al. 2010). Without institutional support and strong leadership accountability, local efforts can not turn personal skills into broader mobility within the institution. As a result, women gain valuable skills through national programs, but they return to environments where outdated biases and a lack of support stop them from using these skills for real influence (Coetzee and Moosa 2025; Herbst et al. 2024).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

In this study, we thoroughly reviewed WLDPs that have been provided in South African public universities. To this end, the study employed a systematic document review. The review adopted an interpretivist approach following a qualitative research approach. Feminist institutionalism and transformational leadership were the theoretical frameworks that underpinned the study. In this review, a total of ($n = 43$) documents, consisting of ($n = 24$) WLDP documents and ($n = 19$) prior studies, were thoroughly reviewed. The findings show that WLDPs in South African public higher education have become a multi-layered system that operates at institutional, national, and international levels. The study concludes that institutional programmes mainly focus on academic growth, leadership skills, mentorship, and career advancement. In contrast, national initiatives are starting to look at the bigger picture by addressing institutional governance, policy implementation, and collective leadership for broad changes in the sector. International partnerships boost these efforts by adding global comparisons, cross-border networking, and ideas from worldwide leadership practices. The evidence reviewed indicates that WLDPs have led to significant positive outcomes, such as increased self-confidence and leadership identity, better managerial and social skills, larger professional networks, and more mentorship opportunities, along with contributions to institutional change. Nevertheless, the present study's findings uncovered several major limitations of the existing WLDPs. Current programmes provided at the institutional level face criticism for their tendency to focus on addressing individual shortcomings instead of tackling deeply rooted patriarchal institutional structures. Moreover, the study also found that a lack of focus on intersectional realities and insufficient long-term support limit these initiatives' effectiveness.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the above findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are suggested to strengthen the effectiveness of WLDPs in South African public HEIs:

Shift from individual-focused to system-focused interventions: at the institutional-level, universities should redesign WLDPs and move beyond addressing perceived individual deficiencies by focusing on structural and cultural barriers that perpetuate gender inequalities within South African academia.

Incorporate intersectionality into programme design: WLDPs should recognize the diverse experiences of women by integrating intersectional factors such as race, age, disability, caregiving responsibilities, cultural expectations, and career stage into programme content, delivery, and support mechanisms. To this end, universities should review workload allocation models, promotion criteria, and flexible work arrangements to remove barriers that disproportionately disadvantage women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities.

Provide ongoing support to WLDPs: as identified in the current study, lack of sustained support to WLDPs is one of the limitations of the existing WLDPs. The institutions should provide sustained support to WLDPs by conducting evidence-based programme evaluation to ensure the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Institutionalizing WLDPs as long-term career pathways: rather than providing isolated workshops and short-term training, institutions should establish formal and continuous leadership development pathways that accompany women throughout different stages of their academic and leadership careers.

6. Study Limitations and Directions for Further Studies

This review presents several limitations. Though the review findings provided significant insights on the effectiveness of the existing WLDPs in the South African higher education landscape, further studies should carefully examine the effectiveness of the WLDPs by employing a mixed research approach, taking various factors that affect the effectiveness of WLDPs into consideration. Another limitation of the present study is that it is only on WLDPs at South African higher education, without comparing other countries' higher education contexts. Even though the study provided comprehensive results by reviewing the existing scientific papers and grey literature regarding the focus areas, effectiveness, and gaps of South African WLDPs, we encourage future researchers to conduct comparative studies to better understand the effectiveness and gaps of WLDPs. Moreover, the review documents were accessed via limited electronic databases. This could lead to missing relevant research available in other databases.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci15100686/s1>, SM1: Table SM1.1, Summary of reviewed prior studies; SM2–4: Table SM2.1, Summary of WLDPs at the University Level; Table SM3.1, Summary of WLDPs at the National Level; Table SM4.1, Summary of WLDPs in Partnership with External Institutions/Countries.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
ERIC	Educational Resource and Information Center
FIT	Feminist Institutionalism Theory
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
JB I	Joanna Briggs Institute
MMAT	Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool
PEO	Population, Exposure, Outcome
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
RSA	Republic of South Africa
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TLT	Transformational Leadership Theory
WLPs	Women's Leadership Programmes

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