

# Speaking of Research

## Series 2 - Michelize van Heerden

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Women's Sports Leadership Academy, gender inequality, leadership development, global challenge, University of Chichester, Anita White Foundation, Leading Edge Performance Group, women-only space, feminist movements, underrepresentation, research impact, storytelling, PhD motivation, sports leadership, diversity.

### SPEAKERS

Catherine McDonald, Michelize van Heerden

#### **Catherine McDonald** 00:04

Hello and Welcome to Speaking of Research, a podcast from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm Catherine McDonald, and in the second series of our podcast, we're focusing on research that addresses global challenges. We'll be in conversation with doctoral researchers about their research, which global challenges they hope to inform, and how they hope their work will make a difference. In this episode, I'm joined by Michelize van Heerden from the University of Chichester, whose work is looking at the impact of a woman Sports Leadership Academy. Michelize tell us more about that.

#### **Michelize van Heerden** 00:45

So the Women's Sports Leadership Academy mostly known as WSLA. And firstly, thank you so much for having me on the show. But WSLA is a residential week that's hosted by the University of Chichester. It's just had its 10th residential. Over 450 women, I believe, have attended around 400 from 78 different countries, which is really incredible. Just shows how global the focus of this topic is, essentially, and yes, it's been started and led by Jordan Matthews with the help of the Anita White foundation, and since it's moved on to the leading edge performance group supporting the residential week.

#### **Catherine McDonald** 01:24

And who attends the academy, who is it open to?

#### **Michelize van Heerden** 01:27

I am always so surprised, I've had the honour of joining two of the residential weeks and helping out, but I'm always so honoured to be in the presence of these incredible women. You have vice presidents of Olympic Federation, Junior National Federations, governing bodies, vice presidents, presidents, sport for development offices. And it's always a 50% focus on women from within the UK, but the other 50% is always a global attendance.

#### **Catherine McDonald** 01:53

Now, the fact that a woman, I'm assuming it's women only.

#### **Michelize van Heerden** 01:57

Yes, so that is women only. There's a woman spaces of focus on belonging, creating that safe space for women to develop as leaders.

**Catherine McDonald** 02:05

So the fact that that exists suggests it was felt there was a need for that. What do you understand about that need?

**Catherine McDonald** 02:13

It's essentially, if you take it all the way back, leadership development program started from very male orientated theories about leadership, how we understood leadership to exist and to be perceived, and how it could be developed. And so within that space, there was only space for men, but through feminist movements, the movement of allowing women to even vote in that sense, you know, it created a space for women to be in the workforce, to be in the workplace, but then that realisation came that there's no space for them in where we develop leaders, and are we developing them correctly, if it's based on male theory? So how can we change the approach, how can we create space for women to develop. And that's really the core of where it has come from. The need to place the focus on women and to provide the space for leadership development for them, especially when you still see that only our national government bodies, I think there's only 26% of women are in CEO position. So there's clearly a need for women to be prioritised in their development journeys for leadership.

**Catherine McDonald** 03:19

And as you've suggested, this is a global challenge.

**Catherine McDonald** 03:22

Yes, exactly. I mean, national government bodies, you know, those are the people in positions to make decisions about where the funding goes, how sport grows, who gets access to sports. So diversity is needed in those leadership positions. I mean, it's really sad that in the last year, the percentage of people from 2020, to 2025, where we are now, there's actually been a decrease in the number of women who are on funded sports boards globally. So there's been almost a 3% decrease, which just shows the global issue.

**Catherine McDonald** 03:56

And that we're going the wrong way.

**Michelize van Heerden** 03:57

Yes, exactly. So something we're doing is not right, whether this is potentially how we're delivering women's own leadership development programs or how we develop leaders in general, how we make board selections, something's not going right. And we need to contribute as much as possible as researchers to helping the world understand what that might be.

**Catherine McDonald** 04:15

And did that form part of your motivation to look at the impact of this particular Academy?

**Michelize van Heerden** 04:20

Exactly. I mean, the core issue is gender inequality in sports and sports leadership. It's a persistent issue. It's a global issue. And there was just the constant same sentence you would read at the start of research papers. There's an under representation, there's an under representation. There's still a lack of representation. And someone once told me, if you get into a PhD, do it for something that really annoys you, and that annoyed me, it was, why are we still having the same conversations we need to move forward in having our conversations about how we're making a difference to gender inequality, how we changing sports for the better.

**Catherine McDonald** 04:54

So what impact have you found the academy having so far?

**Michelize van Heerden** 05:00

I think that's the really exciting thing, that I'm only still in the second year of my journey, and I'm just about to start having those really crucial conversations. But what I've been able to have is a lot of informal conversations with women attending the residential, so seeing the women who come back to be guest speakers on the residentials, or who come back as facilitators, and hearing them speak about the difference that has been made, and that's how I really define impact in my studies, what difference has WSLA made for these women in their life and in their organisations? And it's such a broad spectrum of stories, and I'm so excited to hear about all those different stories, which is why I'm hoping to do something you know different with this study, because a lot of the times when we look at impact, especially within women's leadership development programs, which is very far and few between, but there's always predetermined outcomes that we look at what is the program trying to achieve? How can we justify to the funders of these programs that these programs are doing what they should and hopefully in my study, by doing it the other way around, and really starting with the stories of these women over a long time, six years in collection, what is the true difference that has been made?

**Catherine McDonald** 06:14

And is there you mentioned the the variety of stories that you've heard, is there one that stands out that you would be happy to share.

**Michelize van Heerden** 06:21

There's not a specific story I would relate about what I can say is just by seeing the growth of the program, going from 10-14 people to 36 women, and just the past residential when their bosses, their CEOs, who are sending them on these on WSLA, was on WSLA before. So, it shows a direct line of investment into women, into their future careers, into their leadership. And I think that is an incredibly impactful observation that I could make.

**Catherine McDonald** 06:50

And so what lies ahead for your research then, you mentioned it was obviously at a very early stage. What are your next steps? Talk us through them.

**Michelize van Heerden** 06:58

It's incredibly exciting. I'm a very creative person when it comes to research, and I love talking to people and hearing their stories. And so what comes next is hopefully something that will disrupt the evaluation and impact practice of the industry, so really helping to perform actual knowledge, where we can do sit down with participants, and we will draw out different impacts. We will break those impacts down, we'll see how they change, we'll go forwards and backwards. It sounds very all over the place, but that's what it's meant to be, it's really meant to be them telling their story. So what's next is hopefully getting in touch with all these women who have been on the program and who can then enlighten and engage with creative storytelling to bring to light the impacts that we need to learn from to improve.

**Catherine McDonald** 07:50

Yeah, that would be amazing, wouldn't it, to hear all those those testimonials. And frankly, any interview that has the words disrupt and women in the same interview is a winner for me.

**Michelize van Heerden** 08:00

I think it's just nice, because when I got into it, there's this immediate expectation of, oh you do evaluation, okay, you justify. You have to do, you know, random, controlled trials. You have to start with a theory, create a theory of change. And all of it was so prescriptive and predetermined, and I think as a researcher, it's important to bring your identity into what you are doing, to really be able to contribute to the quality of the research itself. And I think I just made the decision that I need to start with the people who are actually experiencing what is happening,

instead of the starting with predetermined outcomes. So yeah, it will be something very different, very exciting, and I just can't wait to get started.

**Catherine McDonald** 08:46

And that's also great advice for anyone beginning a PhD, I would say. Thanks so much Michelize van Heerden. And thanks to you for listening to this episode of Speaking of Research from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. To find out more, please visit [southcoastdtp.ac.uk](http://southcoastdtp.ac.uk). Don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes. This was a Research Podcasts production.