



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Engaging Communities

Proceedings of the

31st HERDSA Annual Conference

1-4 July 2008

Rotorua, New Zealand

Tessens, L. (2008) A review of current practices in women-only staff development programmes at Australian universities, in *Engaging Communities, Proceedings of the 31st HERDSA Annual Conference, Rotorua, 1-4 July 2008: pp 329-340.*

Published 2008 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 1441 001X
ISBN: 0 908557 73 6

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A review of current practices in women-only staff development programmes at Australian universities

Lucienne Tessens

The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
lucienne.tessens@uwa.edu.au

Women-only staff development programmes have been conducted at Australian universities for many years, and considerable work and effort have been invested in them as a strategy to address gender inequity. However, gender imbalance remains prominent in the senior echelons of the higher education sector. This prompts the question, have staff development programmes for women done enough for the advancement of women into leadership positions? This paper reviews the current practices in women-only staff development programmes being offered at Australian universities. It aims to analyse and define the nature of women-only staff development programmes in the Australian higher education sector and to raise questions about their effectiveness in promoting a more equitable gender balance. What we learn from this review is applicable beyond Australian universities to any organisation that aims to improve gender balance, particularly in the senior ranks.

Keywords: women-only staff development programmes, gender equity

Introduction

Women's participation in senior positions in Australian university teaching, research and administration is relatively low. This is despite the massive expansion of higher education during the past few decades, the increase of women attending courses, years of EEO legislation in Australia, changes in university policies and growing numbers of in-house women-only staff development programmes. According to the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) benchmarking material prepared by QUT Equity Section in November 2007, the sector average of women in general staff positions in 2006 was 61.5%, which reduces at more senior levels to 43.5%. From 2002 to 2006 the sector average for women in senior general staff positions improved by 2.5%. The situation is slightly worse for women academics at Australian universities. In 2006, women academics represented on average 40% of the total academic workforce. Women in senior academic positions represented only 23.1%. Women at professorial level represented only 19.1% on average. DEST data from 1997 to 2005 indicates there is a small improvement in the senior academic management ranks: from 10% to 23% female Vice-Chancellors and from 22% to 30% women Deputy Vice-Chancellors. It is clear from these statistics that the numbers of women in universities, while growing, are still disproportionately under-represented at the senior levels, suggesting continuing systemic and cultural barriers to women's progress within the higher education sector. (ATN WEXDEV 1999; Gale 1998). This is commonly attributed to the historically based underlying masculine culture of universities, as universities were "organised around the

cluster of characteristics, attributes and background circumstances typical of men” (Burton 1997, p.17). Palermo (2004) identified the difficulties women face in a male dominated environment, for example lack of easy access to informal ‘boys’ networks, a shortage of appropriate mentors, lack of workplace flexibility, poor job design and an inability to navigate the political maze. Chesterman, Ross-Smith and Peters’ (2004a) research suggests that strong formal support and encouragement from organisational leaders, a critical mass of other women, networks, flexibility and family-friendly policies and practices, and explicit commitment to values are characteristics of a workplace culture that supports women.

Australian universities have been conducting women-only staff development programmes as one strategy to rectify the gender imbalance. If organisational culture, however, is the key to addressing gender imbalance, I needed to understand the philosophical approach, the purpose and the nature of these staff development programmes. Do they measure up? I wanted to explore not only what their purpose is, but if they are actually designed and fit for that purpose. Are these programmes actually playing a critical role in addressing issues of gendered workplace culture? As a newcomer to staff development programmes specifically for women, I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of women-only programmes in Australian universities. I also wanted to share the information with the community of staff development for women practitioners with the view to improving outcomes of women-only staff development programmes. This paper aims to analyse and define the nature of women-only staff development programmes in the Australian higher education sector and to raise questions about the way in which they are contributing to achieving a gender balance.

Women-only staff development programmes in Australian universities

Before addressing these issues, I review some of the recent research on women-only staff development programmes. Although there is considerable published and unpublished research literature on women-only programmes in the Australian higher education sector, they have not been comprehensively reviewed. Much of the published literature points to the relative benefits of individual programmes and the outcomes for individual participants (McCormack 1996; Devos 2000 and Gardiner et al, 2007). Preparation for this paper included a review of the ‘grey’ literature, that is, unpublished literature related to women-only staff development programmes at Australian universities. Over a hundred articles were collected and analysed. It became clear that the majority of articles, conference papers and institutional reports dealt with the positive aspects of a programme or programme components (for example, Murcia 2001; Wilson 2003; Bjork-Billings & Lawrence 2006; Browning 2006). There was little discussion of the limitations or challenges associated with these programmes.

Positive aspects of women-only staff development programmes were also reported by Willis and Daisley (1997), two principal consultants of the Springboard programme based in the UK, who on the basis of their survey found an overwhelmingly positive response from women towards women-only programmes. This positive feeling was augmented after women staff had attended such programmes. Closer to home in Australia, this was mirrored in the research by Limerick, Heywood and Ehrich (1995)

who, involved in research on women's lives and their careers, clearly point out the advantages of women-only courses. Previous research by Limerick and Heywood (1993) also indicated that there is a particular need for short, intensive, high quality, management courses for women at the mid-management level. They claim that women-only management courses are an effective and appropriate way of beginning to address the under-utilisation of female human resources.

Despite these reported benefits, some practitioners are questioning the value of women-only staff development programmes for a variety of reasons. Rosemary Brown (2000, 2000a), an experienced practitioner in Scotland, poses the question whether there should be more inclusive approaches to staff development activities which deal with aspects of gender inequity in higher education. Some Australian practitioners, such as Devos, McLean and O'Hara (2003) question whether their women-only staff development programme contributes to cultural change for gender equity. They feel that bringing about change needs to happen by paying more attention to the development of more inclusive cultures at the school level instead of at the University level due to the micropolitics of academic life.

Given the many divergent viewpoints about women-only staff development programmes, it is important for practitioners of the women-only staff development community to review and challenge the effectiveness of their programmes. Are they an effective strategy to improve gender balance and to tackle the gendered workplace culture.

Data collection

Each Australian public university's website was checked for details on women-only staff development programmes and information was collated in a spreadsheet, then returned to each university's contact person for verification of the data. Data for each university was gathered under the following headings: name of programme, web link, programme components, duration, purpose, target group and group size. These statistics were presented at a national Staff Development for Women (sdfw) practitioners' meeting in Melbourne Australia (November 2007) and attendees had the opportunity to edit and amend any information. Further investigation of each university's website, programme specific information and flyers enabled a detailed analysis of each programme. Factors explored included whether the programme had a philosophical approach, whether it possessed a planning group/committee and strategic plan, if it was a developmental programme or a training activity, whether it was a smorgasbord or cohort type programme, and where it was located in the university structure.

Universities with staff development programmes for women and target groups

Of the 36 Australian public universities investigated, 31 (86%) have staff development programmes targeted at female staff exclusively. Some universities without a women-only staff development programme reported they were undergoing restructuring and would consider restarting their women-only staff development programme in the

following year. Other universities have staff development programmes not targeted on the basis of gender. Through consulting the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee's summaries of staff development programmes in 1998 and 2001 (ATN WEXDEV 1999, 2001) and 2003 (AVCC, 2003), it is clear that the majority of universities have offered programmes for women in the last ten years.

In 2007, over 25% of the universities conducted programmes for a mixed target group of academic and general staff. Twenty-five percent of the universities, in addition to their programmes for a mixed target group, offered a separate programme for academic staff only. Five universities offered a programme for their female academic staff but no university only runs programmes for its female general staff. One university has a programme for a mixed group as well as a programme for general staff. One university runs a separate programme for its academic and general staff. Finally, one university offers a programme for all three groups: one for a mixed target group of academics and general staff, a programme for its academic staff and a programme for its general staff.

From this we can see that the majority of universities have multiple women-only staff development programmes, each with a different target group. Forty percent of the universities offer programmes for a mixed group of academic and general staff women, while about 50% run a combination of programmes, and the remaining 10% have programmes only for academic staff. From these figures it is clear that more universities are offering women-only staff development programmes for academic staff. There are no attendance records available, so it is difficult to ascertain whether more academic women actually attended staff development courses than their general staff colleagues.

Characteristics of women-only staff development programmes

To enable a deeper understanding of the nature of the women-only staff development programmes offered, I examined whether the programmes had a philosophical approach, a planning group and a strategic plan. Secondly, I explored the design of the programme: does it have a developmental or a training focus and is it a cohort or smorgasbord type activity. In the table below, each of the universities is categorised according to these aspects of their programme. Some universities have multiple programmes, each with a different focus, hence the overlap in categories. I will now address each of these categories.

Table 1: Characteristics of women-only staff development programmes

	Philosophical approach	With planning group	With strategic plan	Leadership development focus	Training focus
Universities n = 31	8 (26%)	3 (9.7%)	1 (3%)	13 42%)	28 (90%)

Philosophical approach

If women-only development programmes aim to address the problem of organisational culture, then we need to design the programmes with a dual agenda so that development is allied with “strategic interventions that challenge and change organisational cultures” (de Vries 2006). Currently only eight universities (26%) in Australia have women-only staff development programmes that explicitly state a philosophical approach and have a dual focus. de Vries (2006), a leading practitioner in the women-only staff development field in Australia, describes a dual agenda programme as engaging the organisation and the women in an organisational change process. This is achieved by going beyond taking a ‘fix the women’ approach to leadership development and by promoting an organisational change strategy. Seventy-four per cent of Australian universities seem to focus on a ‘fix the women’ approach. Women-only staff development programmes with a sole focus on the development of individual skills treat female staff as having a problem and in need of being fixed (de Vries 2006). This theme is reinforced by Bhavnani (1997), a UK leading expert on gender issues:

This notion of “otherness” or “deviant” from the organisational norm suggests that women as a group lack certain skills and behaviours necessary to success. ... This not only confirms a deficit model of women, it puts the major responsibility for change on to women themselves and negates the role of the organization ... in sustaining women’s disadvantage (Bhavnani 1997, p. 142)

Marshall (1995), with an international reputation for her work on women in management, shows that women are leaving senior management positions and confirms that dissatisfaction with ‘male-dominated’ characteristics of organisational culture is a key reason for women to move on. de Vries (2006) asserts that women-only development programmes which do not seriously engage in a broader long-term change process might risk alienating the women and eventually result in declining participation. Kolb (2003), a researcher in the area of organisational gender equity in the USA, also emphasises that helping the women is not enough and that it does nothing to change the environment, so it is likely to have limited success in helping the organisation deal with its identified issues. Closer to home, Blackmore (1999), Professor of Education at Deakin University, claims that the tendency to;

treat the issue of women in leadership in dominant management discourses as merely of upgrading women’s skills to meet the demands of current modes of leadership is blind to the gender politics of educational change (Blackmore 1999, p. 3)

She argues that strategies such as workshops and training to improve women’s skills in areas such as curriculum vitae writing, conflict management, assertiveness and financial management, are focused on changing the individual women, not changing cultures or structures.

Programme design

Three universities (less than 10%) have a planning group or steering committee associated with their women-only staff development programme and only one of these

programmes has a strategic plan. While the majority of programmes at other universities have clearly identified aims and objectives, the presence of a planning group and a strategic plan may assist in providing vision and strategic direction. It is interesting to note that the three universities with a planning group, of which one has a strategic plan, have a women-only staff development programme with a dual agenda.

Let us have a look at an example of one university in which the planning group consists of representatives of the various target groups and at least half of the members are past programme participants. It is guided by a mission and vision statement. The role of the planning group is to provide an overall vision and strategic direction for the women-only staff development programme and this is achieved through:

- establishing strategic direction and priorities;
- recommending changes to the strategic directions and aims of the programme as required;
- monitoring and evaluating programme effectiveness in relation to the mission statement;
- ensuring adequate resourcing and support; and
- advising on matters relating to individual programmes, including participant selection, programme structure, content, timing, progress and evaluation.

The role of the PG, as outlined above, is clearly useful in providing a clear strategic vision, an organisational perspective, a systems approach, and a framework that supports understanding and buy-in from the entire organisation.

I will now look at the difference between programmes with a developmental focus versus those with a training focus. Developmental programmes tend to have a long term focus, are conducted over a longer period of time, focus on the process of change with opportunities for self-reflection. Training, on the other hand, implies the acquisition of skills and knowledge, a means to an end with a short term focus. Willis and Daisley (1997) explain the difference as follows:

So we differentiated between our training courses and those with have a development emphasis. For example, a computer course attended only by women, while being a women-only course, does not fall into our category of development training. Of course, any good training will have a development benefit and good development may involve a training element, so the difference is in emphasis and process. (Willis and Daisley 1997, p.56)

Thirteen universities (less than 50%) have programmes with an explicit development focus; with the aim of enabling women to develop their leadership competencies to increase participation in positions of leadership and decision making. Twenty-eight universities have programmes focusing on skills development. Some universities offer both developmental programmes as well as training for skills, hence the overlap. Willis and Daisley's (1997) extensive research survey shows that the majority of women believed they gained benefit from women-only development programmes.

Developmental programmes can consist of various activities, such as projects, shadowing and peer group learning and often use a combination of components. Eight Australian universities have project based activities whereby participants work individually or as part of a group. An example of such a programme is the 'Equity Initiative Grant Scheme' at the University of New South Wales, which involves 23 women academic staff from 23 schools. Its aim is for participants to better understand how gender operates at the local level and participants implement innovative strategies to address issues identified. Five universities have shadowing and/or observing activities. An example is the 'Women's Leadership Shadowing Programme' at Monash University in which academic women level D or above and professional women level 10 and above complete six half days of shadowing to enable them to enhance their leadership qualities. The shadowing component consists of each participant shadowing a member of senior management to observe them at work in a range of activities. After, each participant attends a 'women in leadership praxis group' to reflect upon her experiences. Peer group learning activities were offered at four universities, where participants work in small groups to explore in greater depth an identified shared issue. The self-organising learning groups meet on a regular basis and members learn to co-operate with others to reach mutual goals. Peer group learning stimulates reflective practice, critical enquiry and self-awareness. It also promotes co-operation and collaboration, respect for varied experiences and backgrounds of participants, which are essential for operating in a complex institution like a university. An example is the peer learning component of the Leadership Development Programme at the University of Tasmania which culminates in a review workshop. de Vries (2005) explains that the review workshop "integrates peer group learning through the development of a final presentation, and a review of future directions for participants". At some universities the women-only staff development programmes consist of a variety of activities, for example a series of workshops, peer learning groups, a public lecture series and a mentor scheme.

Taking a closer look at the developmental programmes offered, I noticed that their focus was on leadership development for women. Women-only staff development programmes with an emphasis on leadership can assist women to find their own style of leadership. Women learn how to "critique and subvert imposed and received notions of leadership" (Sinclair 2004) with the aim of exploring and influencing organisational culture. It is not the purpose of this paper to review the notion of leadership nor leadership styles and philosophies, but we need to be cautious when referring to "women's style of leadership". It is claimed that we need leadership that is done in a different way, that is transformational, flexible, collaborative, open to others, relationship-oriented, done in a "female way" (Chesterman & Ross-Smith 2006), democratic, valuing openness, trust and compassion, humane and efficient (Blackmore 1999). The headlines in management journals, the business press, practitioners and scholars advocate that new kinds of leadership are required for organisations to survive in a complex, ever changing and more competitive environment (Kram & McCollom Hampton 2003). Blackmore (1999) points out that this popular notion of leadership has the potential to "produce a meta-narrative universalizing the category of women and it can position women as self-sacrificing". Leadership development programmes for women, that incorporate a more critical approach to leadership as advocated by Sinclair (2007) have the potential to be a significant aspect of organisational change.

Let us look at an example of a leadership development programme for women that has been in operation for fourteen years at the University of Western Australia. The programme has a philosophical approach and has the following aims:

1. to contribute to cultural change in the university,
2. to enable female staff to develop leadership skills and knowledge in order to increase their participation in positions of leadership and in the University's decision making processes, and
3. to encourage an organisational culture that recognizes the value of self-development and reflection, and that encourages inclusive management styles.

It is a cohort programme with a three day core programme followed by leadership skills development workshops, peer learning groups, career information sessions, a formal mentor scheme, information sessions and networking opportunities. It is open to both academic and general staff, each alternate year focusing on junior or senior women. While it has a strong commitment from senior executive staff, it is also guided by a planning group comprising academic, research and general staff women from a diverse background and disciplines. The programme has a focus on understanding gender, the gendered organisation and gendered leadership.

Some universities that claim to offer a leadership development programme have a training focus with, for example, ad hoc workshops about leadership, assertiveness training, promotion strategies and project management. This kind of leadership programme will assist the individual staff member but might not necessarily affect organisational culture in the long term.

This is not to say there is no place for offering skill type activities which focus on the individual. Let us look at the example of workshops and retreats that nine universities offer for academic staff to enhance their research career, by improving their research quality, impact and productivity. Australian academic publication outputs have been repeatedly found to be low (McGrail et al, 2006) and studies show that women are still less likely to head research teams, apply for research grants and have lower publication rates than their male colleagues (Dever et al, 2006). The relatively low number of women's publications highlights some of the difficulties that women academics are experiencing in building their research expertise and contribution. The course evaluations from a writing retreat from one university (unpublished report) provide evidence that it was a successful activity, not only for producing quality research outcomes, but also through engendering a supportive and collegial network of women across disciplines and seniority. It created a vigorous writing culture, affirmed individuals' writing identities and attendees shared writing practices and publishing knowledge and experience. The benefits for the university in the long term are manifold: an increase in international standard publications, a supported quality research culture, improved networks and an elevated profile of research staff at the university.

I would now like to focus on the link between developmental programmes and using a cohort group of participants and secondly a training programme and using a smorgasbord approach. Cohort programmes cater for the same group of women over a period of time whereas in a smorgasbord approach women choose which activity they wish to attend on

an ad hoc basis. In 2007 there were 14 universities (45%) with a cohort programme and 23 universities (74%) with a smorgasbord programme. Twelve universities (39%) offered both cohort and smorgasbord programmes. No Australian published data is available to compare the outcomes of smorgasbord type programmes versus cohort programmes. A multifaceted qualitative and quantitative evaluation strategy is needed to evaluate the benefits of each type of programme in relation to individual participants benefits and organisational outcomes. Kolb (2003) and de Vries (2006) point out that the use of cohort groups encourages the building of community. Over time participants learn together and it opens up the possibility for them to see that gender issues are embedded in taken-for-granted organisational practices and cultural norms. This cohort group then experiences the power of sharing and support and realizes that they could act together to make changes in the organisation. The use of a cohort group can facilitate developmental learning whereas a smorgasbord approach lends itself to skills training.

Regardless of whether the programme is cohort or smorgasbord type, the workshop format is a common tool used in women-only staff development programmes. Seventy seven percent of universities facilitate workshops on topics ranging from leadership, assertiveness, time management, organisational political savvy and many more. Likewise, networking activities, either as part of a smorgasbord or cohort type programme, are offered by 65% of universities.

Mentoring programmes are a popular strategy in women-only staff development programmes. In 2007, 17 universities (55%) had mentoring programmes. Some universities have training for mentors and mentees, some use more senior male and female mentors, whereas other mentoring programmes are facilitated by external consultants and some have in-house provisions. Some mentoring programmes are more formal (mentor and mentee are matched) whereas others have more informal arrangements, some are part of a wider development programme and some are an isolated activity. de Vries, Webb and Eveline (2006) show how formal mentoring programmes impact on individuals, mentors and mentees, and how it can be an effective cultural change strategy. Gardiner's (2005) evaluation of the mentoring scheme at her institution shows the benefits of mentoring in terms of career development:

mentoring has accelerated junior women academics' careers, probably through improving their research performance and ultimately resulting in promotion for the vast majority of participants. (Gardiner 2005, p. 41)

Tubman (1998) reports mentees at her university believed that the mentoring programme had helped them to develop skills and strategies that would enhance their promotional prospects. As can be seen, mentoring has the potential to be a valuable organisational change strategy.

Location of programme

Of the 31 universities with staff development programmes for women, the women-only programmes were located in:

- 13 (42%) in an organisational and staff development unit,

- 12 (39%) in an equity and diversity unit,
- 4 (13%) in a Human Resources department, and
- 1 programme was split between an organisational and staff development unit and an equity and diversity unit.

It is unknown what the implications are of having women-only staff development programmes located in an organisational and staff development unit or in an equity and diversity unit. It might create a problem for the practitioner community as aims and objectives might be perceived differently depending on where the programme is located. Practitioners might find it difficult to meet as a cohesive unit if ultimate aims and objectives are different. Interesting to note is that of the eight universities identified with a dual agenda:

- 1 is situated in a Human Resources unit,
- 3 are situated in an organisational staff development unit, and
- 4 in an equity and diversity unit.

It certainly poses the question whether the location has an impact on the programmes' outcomes. This area needs further research.

Conclusion

Although women-only staff development programs have been offered for many decades, and an incredible amount of work and effort has been invested in addressing gender inequity, there is still a gender imbalance in the senior ranks of the workforce at Australian universities. This paper has reviewed women-only staff development programmes for their philosophical approach or absence thereof, the developmental or training focus, cohort or smorgasbord approach and their location. This review of current practices at Australian universities is designed to assist women-only staff development designers and facilitators in revisiting the underlying assumptions, values and approaches of their programmes. Current practices must be challenged to optimise women's leadership opportunities. Without a clear strategy that includes a focus on organizational culture, programs will continue to help individual women fit into organizational cultures while leaving those cultures untouched. Further research is needed to investigate how women-only staff development programmes can address issues of organizational culture, to ensure that universities are as inclusive and welcoming of women and their contributions as they are of men. It is important for co-ordinators of women-only staff development programmes of any organisation to engage with other practitioners from the women-only staff development community to critically review and improve professional development programmes for women.

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