

## Australian academic women in perspective: Recasting questions of gender, research and knowledge

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### ABSTRACT

This research focuses on senior academic women in Australian universities in the 21st century with particular attention to issues surrounding the politics of career progression, research culture and knowledge governance. In asking why so few women succeed in reaching senior executive roles in Australian universities, the discussion sets out to identify and expose some of the politics of gender equity in the academic environment of higher education, in context of the pressures of research accountability and knowledge management of the restructured university. It claims that if we are to identify and interrogate impediments for women academics we need to understand these issues in broader political contexts of the institutional cultures of globalisation. Data of women in senior academic roles in Australia provide the starting points to review recent literature, identify impediments for women and raise further questions. The discussion then turns to ways of seeking solutions through nation-wide measures in Australian universities. It concludes with a brief examination of the implications for women subjects and the recasting of academic identities. The Australian academic context is the focus but the applications are wider than this one location.

*There are many challenges facing universities ... universities must draw more upon under-represented groups, particularly their women staff. They must attract, appoint and retain more women in professorial and management positions. They must improve the participation, success and leadership of women in research in order 'to capitalize on the intellectual capital and potential of significant numbers of successful female undergraduates, honours students and research higher degree students'. They must develop their staff to take on leadership positions which involve management of significant financial and human resources and working in a competitive entrepreneurial and political environment (AVCC, 2006: 1).*

1. S. Bell and R. Bentley, Women in Research: Discussion Paper, AVCC, November 2005, p. 25.

### The scenario for senior academic women in Australia

Women academics are under-represented at the senior academic levels in Australian universities. A brief audit of data from the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST, 2004) demonstrates significant gender disparities: 70% of all Vice-Chancellors are male, 30% female; 74% Deputy Vice-Chancellors are male, 26% female; and of Professors (Level E), 84% are male and 16% female. The question must be asked, why so few women? After all, more than half the academic population in Australia is female (46,184 female to 41,474 male in 2004; see DEST figures). As one of



the 16% female Professors in Australian universities I am increasingly aware of my minority position and the responsibilities this carries. Today there are eight women Vice-Chancellors of 38 universities in Australia. This may be compared to one woman Vice-Chancellor of eight universities in New Zealand where I previously worked.<sup>1</sup>

A quick glance at these facts suggests the situation in Australia is more hopeful than in New Zealand; however while the data suggests an impressive upward trend in Australia the position for women in leadership is still tenuous. In 1996 women Vice-Chancellors in Australia represented only 5% of the total, with 95% male, and eight years later in 2004 the female numbers had increased to 30%. Of Deputy Vice-Chancellors in 1996, 19% were female, 81% male; and in 2004, 26% female. Women Academic Level E (professors) in Australia increased from 10% in 1996 to a meager 16% in 2004 with males holding onto a secure 84% (DEST, 2004). In New Zealand the percentage of female professors increased from a low 7% in 1994 to 13% in 2004 (Guerin, 2006: 21). The percentages of women in these higher academic positions are abysmally low notwithstanding the increases in the past decade. Patterns persist. Women in the professoriate in Australia increased by less than 2% between 2000 and 2004 – a typical trend. In her paper *Writing (Research) Culture*, Sharon Bell (2006, Abstract) references the figures for women in the professoriate in the western world as “between an abysmal 5% to a pathetic 19%”.

The trends show a very gradual increase in women at senior academic levels – as gradual and slow as the tortoise. Given this rate of ‘progress’ we will all be well gone before we see any real gender equality in university leadership unless we work effectively for change now. We need to ensure equitable working environments for the younger generation of academic women and we need to work actively to retain the more experienced and senior academic women as productive contributors of an ageing workforce.

The overall picture presented by these statistics is bleak but not atypical of OECD countries. In a case study of women academics in the UK, Forster (2001: 28) cites the Hansard Society Commission (1990: 21): “It is unacceptable that the UK’s universities should remain bastions of male power and privilege ... all universities should take steps to ensure women’s fair representation, and should monitor and publish information about women’s progress”. Has the situation improved for women since this statement was made in 1990? Forster claims it has not, and with women still under-represented in significant leadership roles in UK universities, “the ingrained structural and socio-cultural barriers” for women must be addressed and overcome if gender equity is to translate from equal opportunity rhetoric into effective action for change (2001: 28-29).

What are the implications and issues for women academics at this time of decreased public funding for universities, highly competitive markets, commodified and commercialised knowledge production, performance based research funding, and externally inscribed global pressures impacting the local, coupled with demographic changes with higher average ages of childbirth for the first child, increasing partner changes and an ageing workforce? This is the question I set out to ask and answer, knowing it was situated in a complex terrain of the politics of knowledge management and institutional governance in a globalised economic model of knowledge, finance and information transfer.

Investigating the scenario for women academics in Australia, a fascinating if somewhat disturbing picture emerges: that for all the advances for women over the last three decades the situation for women in the universities of the 21st century is not at all positive, in fact it can be downright difficult, often disheartening and even disturbing. In spite of equal employment opportunities embedded in policy and governance, women are in a minority in those crucially important senior academic roles including directors of research centers and externally funded research institutes. The question is, why? It is disturbing for women academics, yes, but it ought to be disturbing for all those in governance roles in every university in the country, whether they be men or women, for if the educational institutes do not maximise the capabilities and potentials of

*all* their workforce then we could collectively suffer the consequences in the escalating changes and pressures of the global world.

In raising these issues I am aware that questions of gender are embedded in questions of knowledge and power and are no longer fashionable in a post-postmodernist world of economic rationalism where room for critical debate is diminished. For those women working in the restructured universities and leading academic units there is an inevitable tension between their work as academic leaders, negotiating the constraints and maximising the opportunities of a global knowledge economy, and their work as researchers exposing and politicising those very conditions within which they live and work.

## The literature

As academics we inhabit a professional world assumed to be equitable in opportunities following the feminist advances of the late-1960s and 1970s and the equal opportunity moves of the 1980s and 1990s. So why the gender disparities, and what is going on for women today?

### *Policy measures*

If we cast our minds back to the significant policy measures for women in the 1980s there ought to be, surely, no cause for concern. The *1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* gave rise in Australia to the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and the *Affirmative Action Act 1986*. In New Zealand the *Education Amendment Act 1990* embedded a requirement for universities to have an equal opportunity policy and to report on it annually to the Minister of Education (see Munford & Rumball, 2001: 137). Policy strategies were implemented through the institutions of society, industry and public sector to ensure anti-discrimination on the basis of gender, and universities were careful to establish equity and equal employment opportunity policies (see Bessant, 1998). However, as exclusions and impediments persist for women academics we need to identify and address the contributing factors.

### *Reports on gender equity*

These questions have been profiled in a number of significant reports in Australia over recent years. For example, Dr Clare Burton's *Gender Equity in Australian University Staffing* (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, DEETYA, 1997) was a comprehensive research on the situation for women academics and the sorts of questions that must be put on the agenda for analysis if change is sought. The report drew from equity reviews in 22 of the 36 publicly funded universities, "to identify the cultural and structural barriers to the achievement of equitable employment outcomes for academic and general staff women and the implications of these barriers for staffing policies and management practices in Australian universities" (1997: xi). Burton began by revealing that in the 1990s male and female perceptions of discrimination in academic circles were quite different and that women were more likely to contest the under-representation of women in universities (3). "It was not uncommon for male staff to argue that EEO had gone too far and that women were 'more equal than others' " (4) and men tended to overestimate the numbers of women around them in significant academic positions. This was not women's perception. They saw the situation of under-representation as one of systemic discrimination. Burton discussed the managerial climate of universities in the 1990s, a situation that subsequently exacerbated in the 2000s, claiming that systemic discrimination must be addressed. Burton cited the "University of Western Australia's draft equity review report which stated, 'the single most important change required is to the culture of masculinity' and its implicit values (1995, p. 10)" (8). Addressing the different career trajectories of many women academics in the changing demographic compositions of the university and changing labour markets in Australia, Burton's report solicited material relating



to women's roles, positions and participations, investigating legislative provisions for equal opportunity and systemic impediments to women's progression in academic culture and finally made recommendations to the Australian government in response to these findings.

Other significant investigations of gender equity in higher education include Kerry Carrington and Angela Pratt's 2003 report for distribution to Senators and Members of the Australian Parliament, *How Far Have We Come? Gender Disparities in the Australian Higher Education System*. Carrington and Pratt showed that in spite of gains in women's participation in universities there remained a significant gender equity issue in the sector. Across the Tasman, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) report, *Gender and Academic Promotion: A Case Study of Massey University* (Doyle, Wylie & Hodgen, 2005) focused specifically on one university, Massey, to identify and investigate similar lines of concerns. At the time, just under half of the academic staff of Massey University were women and, as in Australia, they were over-represented at lecturer level and under-represented at all senior academic levels. Identified problems for women's career progression included the lack of role models and mentors, heavy workloads, insufficient time for research, excessively time-consuming processes for compiling a portfolio for promotion, and the need for good quality and affordable childcare (10).

In February 2006, a commissioned report of the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) was published, *Strategic Review of the Tertiary Education Workforce: Tertiary Education Workforce Statistics. Background Report* (Guerin, 2006). This report is part of a wider strategic review of tertiary education in New Zealand. Providing comprehensive data on gender and other equity statistics to inform further discussion in the sector, it includes statistics back to 1986 and some international comparisons. Data on gender (Table 10, 2001 data, 2006: 20) shows that female participation in the tertiary education academic workforce is increasing in New Zealand, with the highest percentage of total academics (male and female) being in the 40-54 year age group (2001 Census). The highest percentage of females is in the 25-49 year age group, and from then on there is a noticeable decline in female participation with males outnumbering females from ages 50 to 70+. Why should there be a decrease of women in the senior ages (50+)? The report writers make this point: "Given the age structure of the workforce, female participation is likely to be above male participation in the workforce in the 2006 Census and well into the future" (2006: 21). There is no analysis of the contributing factors to lower numbers of women in the post-50 years, yet according to my research there are identifiable impediments for women advancing or even staying in academic careers. If there is to be an increasing female workforce, as noted by Guerin (2006), then university governance must give attention to the roles and positions of this increasing group of women academics to ensure that there are no impediments to achieving their full potential as leaders of the tertiary/higher education workforce.

Adding to the literature, in 2006 the OECD Development Centre has published an extensive report, *Measuring Gender (In)Equality: Introducing the Gender, Institutions and Development Data Base (GID)* (Jütting, Morrisson, Dayton-Johnson & Drechsler, 2006). Such information will inform the building of research and analysis on the "influence of social and cultural norms on the status of women" (2006: 5). The *Gender, Institutions and Development Data Base* is the first of its kind to address a gap in the provision of "information resource on the various dimensions of gender inequality" (6). Presented as a "tool to determine and analyse obstacles to women's economic development" (5) it makes the following important point:

Contrary to conventional thinking the status of women does not automatically improve with rising incomes, gender specific policies ... or legal reforms. These policies will only be successful if simultaneously long-standing discriminatory traditions and privileges that benefit men are simultaneously challenged" (5).

A number of significant reports from the university sector inform this challenge, with particular attention to women in research and impediments to academic progression. The most recent of these are, *When Research Works for Women*, Monash University (Dever, Morrison, Dalton & Tayton,

2006); *Women in Research*, Griffith University (Bell & Bentley, 2005); and from the University of South Australia, *The Great Barrier Myth: An investigation of promotions policy and practice in Australian universities* (Winchester, Chesterman, Lorenzo & Browning, 2005).

A collection of papers from a conference at RMIT (February 2004) was published as *Women and Work* (Charlesworth & Fasteanu, 2004; see in particular, Probert, 2004: 7-26). The publication is concerned with workplace inequalities for women “in political structures and in economic resources” (2004: 1). The project was devised as a way of extending research in this field, and also developing communication within and across disciplines in the Portfolios of ‘Design and Social Context’ and ‘Business’, and through a range of methodologies, to focus on “the complexity of women’s lives; lives requiring an often tenuous balancing of paid work and ‘private’ lives, including family obligations and relationships, a balancing act often undertaken in unsupportive environments” (2004: 2).

From New Zealand, in addition to the 2005 report on Massey University, already discussed, there was the AUT University report, *Researching Women*, supported by the AUT Chancellor’s Women’s Research Fund, administered by WOC Women on Campus (Jülich, Mansfield & Terrell, 2004). This work considered women in the culture of research in context of a “coercive and self-regulatory system of tertiary education”, as stated in the project abstract. The collation of quantitative data provides a valuable basis for analysis of what is going on for women and how women are affected by the regulatory system of knowledge and research. Similar to other work cited here, it seeks to highlight impediments to women’s full participation in research and academic lives.

Further to these reports there are increasing numbers of critically engaged articles and monographs: for example, Asmar (1999), Chesterman (2000); Devos and McLean (2000); Brooks & Mackinnon (2001); White (2001, 2004); Currie, Thiele and Harris (2002); Neale and White (2004); Bell (2004); Probert, (1999, 2005); Payne and Shoemark (2005). The conference papers from Australian Technology Network Women’s Executive Development (WEXDEV) contribute a rich resource of recent research. The 2006 conference, *Change in Climate? Prospects for gender equity in universities* (WEXDEV, 2006a, 2006b) was an important event profiling significant political issues for debate. In the report of the conference, RMIT Vice-Chancellor, Margaret Gardner draws attention to the need for universities to respect non-traditional career paths. Major challenges for women academics are cited as “the highly competitive environment in which universities now function and the pressures of such initiatives as the Research Quality Framework”. Also cited are the disadvantages for women when child-bearing coincides with peak research productivity (WEXDEV, 2006a: 3).

Each of these publications reviews a particular perspective on questions of gender equity, using a range of methodologies. There is one common imperative emerging: an urgent need to address the situation of under-representation of women in academic research and leadership in the restructured university.

## **The restructured university**

If we are interrogating the pressures and impediments for women academics today we need to understand the broader political contexts of higher education and the pressures and challenges of globalisation. The present global information age may be described as a hyperreal world<sup>2</sup> of e-commerce and increasingly technologised finance and information transfer through which wealth is generated and knowledge and its determinants are formed and framed. It may also be described as a world in which education is restructured as an economic engine to fuel the escalating demands of knowledge creation in the name of innovation, enterprise and progress (see OECD, 1996). This translates to ever-increasing efficiencies through a range of measures such as institutional mergers, increasing productivity and rationalisations of academic programmes, devolution of responsibilities, diminishing resources and casualisation of the workforce. It must also be noted that



in the western world these conditions are occurring in context of demographic change with an ageing workforce.

We are, indeed, living in a protean world of escalating knowledge production, where knowledge is pulled into the service of a rationalised economy and measured accordingly via its rate of transfer, its identifiable innovation and efficient commercialisation. The universities must reorganise internally to respond and comply with external demands or lose credibility and financial viability. Thus the restructured university, and its academic workforce, is increasingly accountable to demands of the global knowledge economy and its ubiquitous formations. At the same time there are renewed necessities for diversity and equity. In 2003 the Australian Federal Minister of Education, Science and Training announced “the reform priorities of *Sustainability, Quality, Equity, Diversity*” (Nelson, 2003) as the new nation-wide focus for Australian universities. If these are “the reform priorities” for Australian universities, then critical analysis and action is required in the name of equity and diversity to make the rhetoric an effective reality for all academics, suggesting the time is right for some sort of political revision.

### **An historical glance**

If we look at questions of gender and equity historically we can identify power relations as a crucial concern. Arguably systemic issues of power relations inform struggles over equity and equal pay for equal work, violence against women, education for women and the girl-child as a human right, effective advancement for women in the workforce, the revisioning of recorded history, acknowledgement and value accorded to the work and attitudes of women in a range of fields, all of which are informing the worthy Millennium Goals of the 21st century. Struggles for the rights of women are not new. Feminist advances were notable in the Anglo-American world of the 1970s and 1980s, and in those days struggles were located in the discriminatory conditions of race, gender, class and creed through the human rights movements. Challenges and changes soon became highly visible throughout the western world. However there is an underlying concern when we speak of ‘advancement’ and ‘progress’. Women might enter the dominant groups, they may ‘advance’ sufficiently to remove themselves from violent situations, engage with enhanced educational opportunities, and ensure the revision of recorded history, but is there any real change in the power relations of the given culture that has permitted the entry of that woman into its ranks?

In those earlier decades of feminist enquiry and action it was the Continental feminist writers, such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, who brought attention to politically philosophical questions underpinning epistemological and ontological conditions of power that were systemic in western knowledge and its institutional practices. They revealed how the ontologies of power worked through the propositional language of the rationalised subject of progress. Such debates informed and characterised the domains of intellectual enquiry, which in turn informed institutional, cultural and social practices.

Today, however, these concerns have retreated. The genealogies of these intellectual and cultural contestations might continue to flow in the social lineages of our present world, but their influences as political discourses have significantly diminished. Today higher education becomes more concerned with funding regimes and profit culture, commodification and commercialisation of knowledge, and the micro-politics of knowledge management, measurement and governance. Academic work, including research evaluations and criteria for promotion, are inextricably networked into these new political conditions. Now, with equity and diversity back on the agenda for attention, the systemic issues to do with power relations call to be re-addressed in all their manifestations.

## Research culture: Identifying impediments for women

At the 2003 conference of ATN Women's Executive Development Program (WEXDEV) an argument prevailed that "women were excluded from the rituals of research culture" (WEXDEV, 2003: 3). It cannot be overlooked that we are operating in a managerialist ethos of higher education where new rituals of compliance and accountability mark our every move, and where research and its financial viability is the primary measure of value for position and promotion. Academic research is evaluated according to quantitative and qualitative output with external funding models legitimating its currency. What might this mean for women? Extrapolated from the literature there are four identifiable groupings of impediments for women in research culture: *Languages of audit and performance; Demographic changes and family responsibilities; Networking and mentoring; Division of labour.*

### *Languages of audit and performance*

The conditions of adding to the quantum of knowledge seem to far outweigh the conditions of qualitative value that such knowledge might question, examine, extend or critique. Languages of audits and bibliometrics, citation databases and research evaluation start to take precedence in an externally funded research environment. With the advent of the RAE, Research Assessment Exercise (UK), PBRF, Performance Based Research Funding (New Zealand), and RQF, Research Quality Framework (Australia, in final review by four Working Groups: Metrics, Modeling, IT, and Impact), the emphases on research outputs, accountability and compliance, and the necessity to establish powerful international networks are leaving academics nowhere to hide from external pressures demanding economic explanations and justifications.

The new managerial state presents knowledge creation, use and organisation as its methodological process for the justification of value for the institution and its academics. In 2003 the Australian Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson declared a need for "Resilience, both economic and human" – to be largely driven by research, teaching and scholarship that can be measured by international benchmarks. Warning against "a long-term collision course with mediocrity that can only be avoided by embracing change now", Nelson described his package of reforms as "a balance of sound policy with the pragmatism required to deliver what Australia needs and the future demands" (2003). Academics are caught into this rhetoric for the future, constituting individual subjectivities as surely as it frames the institutions themselves. Measurement and accountability take precedence in the new world of globalised economies. Women are just as capable of achieving quality research outputs as are men, yet statistics show that their performance is less consistent and less rewarded and, as a result, their progression up the academic ladder is thwarted and promotion too often becomes an illusive goal.

### *Demographic changes and family responsibilities*

In the quest for research excellence there can be relentless pressure on academic lives regulated in new ways via workplace frameworks and expectations. Research and its productivity becomes a key indicator of worth and these added responsibilities and hierarchies of performance can weigh heavily on female academics. Belinda Probert (2005: 68) shows that women suffer from lack of time to do research and that "research is the only thing that can be put off in a schedule filled with teaching, research, administration and children". Drawing from her large-scale study of 2002, Probert argues that demographic changes and social impacts of families are primary contributors to the "remarkable persistence of unequal outcomes for men and women" (2005: 51) in Australian academic careers.

This is confirmed by Jenny Neale and Kate White (2004) in *Almost There: A comparative case study of senior academic women in Australia and New Zealand*, which examines policy frameworks



within which career progressions are structured in both countries. In particular they examine barriers for movement from Associate Professor to higher levels. Their study confirms that the priority criteria of research productivity and international excellence for academic advancement can be particularly difficult for female academics to sustain. The need to balance work, family, pastoral and partner's care and community obligations, and interruptions to career input and advancement, are cited as relevant and particularly problematic in the climate of masculinist managerialism that largely predominates in research cultures.

### *Networking and mentoring*

This perspective is supported in The University of Queensland Women Professors' Network, which is set up to "strengthen links amongst senior academic women within the University, and also to provide a forum for meeting with senior women at other universities and in other sectors" (UQ, 2005). At the network's launch in March 2005, Professor Margaret Gardner is cited on the website of the Equity Office at UQ for referencing "the value of such a network; in countering the isolation that is experienced by women in senior positions with complex tasks and responsibilities". The UQ example is but one of many where women academics are forming support groups to strengthen the position, performance and visibility of women in organisational research structures.

The importance of networking and mentoring is crucial when research is on the agenda. Asmar (1999, in Dever *et al.*, 2006) argues that women are particularly vulnerable in the early stages of their careers or if they need to take time away from their academic careers. It is difficult to find time for consistent application to research when career paths are broken. Many women academics site lack of consistent application to research as one of the major problems.

### *Division of labour*

Dever *et al.* further point out that there is a basic gender distinction in research activities because there is a gender distinction in the division of labour. Citing Bagilhole and White (2003), they write, "the differentiation of academic roles based on gender has women concentrating on teaching and administration which allows men to concentrate on research and publishing – activities that receive the highest rewards in terms of status, promotion and financial reward" (2006: 5). This is confirmed by the statistics in my university where of 150 research-only fulltime staff 53 are women and 97 are men (RMIT, 2006). In administration and support staff in Portfolio and Schools, of 712 staff 430 are women and 282 are men (RMIT, 2006). There are many ways to interpret these figures, but one is in terms of the previous proposition by Dever *et al.* – that men are the intellects and thinkers who do the 'real' research, and women are the supporters who care for others. While this might be a simplistic binary proposition, according to Dever *et al.* (2006) such role differentiations continue to be about the politics of labour in the academic workplace; and according to political and philosophical interrogations by writers such as Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Michel Foucault *et al.*, the politics of labour are underpinned by systemic issues to do with the power/knowledge matrix and can only be contested effectively through deeper forms of interrogation and intervention.

The concern of Dever *et al.* (2006) is to isolate factors contributing to successful careers for academic women in the research domain. The report collated findings from academic women researchers at Monash University, Melbourne, to identify factors critical to women's research performance. The positives include the "passion and excitement they felt for their research; having good international connections and research networks; having effective mentors and supervisors; ... (and) high levels of flexibility in the workplace..." (2006: 1). Areas for improvement in policy and practice included "work/life balance", as well as the need for "administrative support and the provision of research facilities"; and there was the identification of "elements of gender



discrimination". From this report the writers made recommendations to the university for improved conditions for women in research.

### **Career advancement: Impediments for women**

There are many narratives to highlight the way systemic issues militate against women's full participation. "Being a female in senior academia in Australia is a hard road to travel, and it can be harder still to even reach that point", wrote Kate White (2001: 64). There is no doubt that there exists a disproportionate number of women at the lower end of the academic hierarchy and lack of women in the higher executive roles. In their report, Carrington and Pratt (2003: 7) identified, "poor representation of women on decision-making bodies, such as academic senates, councils, and university promotion panels"; and "notions of merit and success are based more closely on what men in universities do well, to the overall detriment of women"; men applying more often for senior posts; women doing less research than men; more male academics working in areas of research that attract industry funding; male academics predominating in research fields aligned to national research priorities; and "informal organisational obstacles in the way of women's career advancement"; and, in line with Probert, interrupted career paths with nurturing children and family responsibilities.

The identified reasons for problems of career advancement for women are multi-faceted, often complex and rarely overt. It would be easy to overlook these factors in the pressing demands of everyday academic management. A report of the conference, *Women Research and Publication in Higher Education* (WEXDEV, 2003) reinforces the crucial issues including the politics of advantage, and identity and power (Jen de Vires), need for critical mass, collaboration and collegiality (Anne Ross-Smith), values and conflicting pressures (Linley Lord), conceptualisation of leadership and value systems of organisations (Bell), late entry to academia, less powerful networks, and working in fields with less access to major funding (Chesterman). *Critical massing* and *Lack of role models* are singled out as two of the most significant impediments in the literature.

#### *Critical massing*

The significant lack of numbers of females in senior roles (Associate Professor and above) can militate against grouping together for collaborative and collegial work practices and support; and when one's culture is in the minority it is more difficult to build a community or *critical mass* based on shared values. Women academics can be fragmented by familial and social responsibilities, often requiring breaks in their career progression for parental responsibilities, which remove them from the required time and energy for the sustained workforce practice and performance required for promotion. White (2001: 64) raises as significant the issue of critical mass. This concern points to the logic that if more women remained in higher education and moved to senior academic positions there would be a greater critical mass for networking and for mentoring early career women academics. Male academics generally grow into their role with the support of an existing critical mass of the male hegemony with its majority values, attitudes and behaviours. In other words the community of shared values, albeit abstract and assumed, strengthens the norm as it exercises its dominant ethos and synergies. Writing of the politics of community, Chantal Mouffe (1992: 20) defines such a community as having "the same juridical attributes and, in principle, access to the same cultural resources for the exercise of these attributes". Thus the community of implicitly understood and shared values self-perpetuates.

Here lies what Thornton calls "the power of existing élites" (1996: 290). Power alignments reinvest in their own power. Elsewhere Thornton puts the responsibility for the diminishment of a collective female support structure onto the changes in political governance of a contemporary neoliberal economy. "The intimate relationship effected between neoliberal governments and the market has caused civil society to contract and faith in the political to diminish", writes Thornton

(2004: 1). Females are historically positioned outside the norms of the rationalised market subject and must either behave like males in the competitive world of advancement or they must be satisfied that their level of advancement will suffice given the weight of other family and social responsibilities. But where is the space for a political voice? As pressing concerns for knowledge production and information transfer, performance accountability and compliance increase in the institutional practices of academia, there appears to be less and less time or legitimacy for gender-based issues to be disclosed and openly discussed.

### *Lack of role models*

One of the implicit problems facing women in the restructured universities is a lack of role models. With women at only 16% of Level E academics (Professors) in Australia (DEST, 2004), and an even lower 13% in New Zealand (Guerin, 2006), not only is there a shortage of role models but there is a lack of public political debate regarding the factors contributing to this shortage. The norms of economic rationalist models of workplace behaviour leave little room for critical discourse. Depoliticised knowledge takes precedence in the regimes of input-output accountabilities, postgraduate completions, and economic explanations. The privileging of applied technologies, skills and attributes tends to have the effect of sidelining concerns for cultural, linguistic and gendered difference to the extent that masculinist norms are re-inscribed in the interests of efficiently rationalised answers to potentially problematic and often time-consuming questions.

Identifying these problems is one thing, but is there any form of redress and concerted political intervention? At the recent Australian Technology Network (ATN) Women's Executive Development Conference in Adelaide (2006), the Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, Julie Bishop, who also holds the portfolio of Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Women's Issues, endorsed the vital need for role models and mentors for academic women, as she drew attention to the ageing workforce and the need to retain high level academics (Thomson, 2006: 1). The ATN, through its Women's Executive Development Program (WEXDEV) works actively for career development and enhancement by providing support and advocacy to effect change for women (see WEXDEV website). This is a network that signifies success for women academics. With women Vice-Chancellors at the helm of three of the five ATN universities there is no shortage of role models at the highest executive level of this group. It is perhaps worth noting that of the 'Group of Eight' universities in Australia, commonly known as the most prestigious universities in terms of longevity, research quantum and resource wealth, there is not (yet) one woman Vice-Chancellor.

### **Seeking solutions**

Responding to the significant concerns of gender equity in Australian universities, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, the council of Australia's university presidents (AVCC) has recently released a new plan of action, *The Second AVCC Action Plan for Women Employed in Australian Universities 2006-2010* (April 2006). The plan starts by acknowledging that although there have been considerable improvements in the numbers of women employed as academic and general staff in Australian universities since the first *AVCC Action Plan for Women Employed in Australian Universities 1999-2003*, there persists an issue with gender equity. It then sets out five priority goals to 2010 (AVCC, 2006: 2):

1. To continue to encourage all universities to integrate equity strategies and performance indicators into their institutional plans and to support the priorities of this Plan;
2. To improve significantly the representation of women in senior roles by encouraging equity initiatives in critical areas;
3. To monitor the patterns of entry of women into academia and respond to barriers to sustained entry;

4. To improve the monitoring of gender equity in workforce data and access to information; and
5. To identify, and engage universities with critical matters through research on gender equity issues and dissemination of good practice. This will include:
  - women in research and the impact of the Research Quality Framework (RQF);
  - conditions of university employment policy and practice that impact on women and the attainment of gender equity; and
  - identification of barriers to participation and leadership.

Each of the priority goals has critical targets and measures including the increase of women at Level E (Professor) from 16% in 2004 to 25% by 2010, and in Level D (Associate Professor) from 24% in 2004 to 35% by 2010. This will necessitate an increase in the numbers of women with PhDs and the incorporation of gender equity issues in leadership programmes.

The underlying aims of *The Second AVCC Action Plan for Women Employed in Australian Universities 2006-2010* are to identify and address issues of diversity across the sector and to “bring about improved equity and an inclusive culture” (AVCC, 2006: 1). The Plan explicitly encourages “all universities in Australia to include gender equity performance measures in their corporate plans and quality assurance processes”, the sponsorship of “significant research projects relevant to the Action Plan”, leadership development for women, support for the services of the Australian Colloquium of Senior Women, and promotion of equity for women by publishing the plan, providing information, disseminating results of research, publicising best practice and achievements in gender equity, and liaising with government and other organisations (2006: 3-4).

If the WEXDEV moves for mentoring and capacity building continue with their present strength and visibility, and the adoption of *The Second AVCC Action Plan for Women Employed in Australian Universities 2006-2010* is followed by effective political and pragmatic action in *all* Australian universities, then the future may hold some promise for women academics.

## Academic identities

With changing conditions the diverse academic identities of women may then be recognised for their values of difference rather than marginalised as the significant ‘academic other’. There is no doubt that as universities reposition and restructure we have been witnessing a recasting of subjectivity via the *cogito* of those incessant global marketplace determinants. Academics are expected to conform to newly rationalised principles of governance and work actively within these conditions if they are to progress up the ladder of promotion. Overall we witness a recasting of the meta-narratives of progress, and folding of education and the human subject into the relations of power of a re-inscribed modernity (see Grierson & Mansfield, 2004: 5). If this is so, there is a need to review the shaping of academic identities within these codes of action and performance. We might ask, for example, as we interrogate the “gendered agenda in academia” (Asmar, 1999), how the relations of subjective identity and democratic citizenship are articulated in educational practices in these new conditions (see Chantal Mouffe, 1993), and what sort of democracy is at stake here? (see Devine, 2005: 67-74).

If one casts the mind back to the 1990s when Burton (1997) found that female academics were less likely to engage a single-minded approach to their academic career and research than men (1997: 20), particular forms of academic identity were made visible, and particular forms of democracy exercised. Burton suggested that women academics were more concerned with “a broader notion of ‘corporate citizenship’ than men ... making sure the local organization works, that students are looked after and that the university is doing its duty with respect to all of its obligations and responsibilities” (21). Acting on behalf of the university in this way may effect women’s

academic progression, but Burton suggests (21) it comes from the attitude of reasoning that Carol Gilligan (1982) called “an ethics of care” as distinct from the more abstract attributes of the male “ethics of justice”. Extending this perspective Burton (22) referenced women academics as “campus citizens” participating actively in university governance and community processes.

Perhaps care and justice could unite in our envisaged ‘brave new world’ of non-discriminatory attitudes to diversity and equality? Is it ever possible that we may witness the politics of diversity and difference as an embedded understanding/action throughout all the board rooms and meeting rooms, all the research fora and academic hubs, all the systems and processes of the corporatised university? Hope may be expressed with the greatest of ease, but within it there is always the cautionary tale. I would argue from experience and from the literature that there persists a standard or norm by which the ‘good academic’ is measured and evaluated – tacitly as well as overtly. This ‘good academic’ signifies a neutralised gendered subject devoid of personal or external commitments demonstrating his or her abilities via externally monitored measures of excellence. No longer is it deemed part of relevant discourse the claim that a female might once have made that one of their primary responsibilities is caring for elderly parents, young or post-teenage children or the next generation, and that these experiences might be part of their identity formations and strengths. Perhaps there is a greater need to integrate these narratives into academic conversations. Such discourses are invariably marginalised in these newly rationalised conditions notwithstanding well-meaning rhetoric to the contrary and in spite of policy strategies to do with equity, equal opportunities, diversity and non-discrimination.

Dever *et al.*, (2006: 5) had written, “Women are caught in a difficult position of trying to ‘perform’ like men while negotiating traditional gender stereotypes relating to the division of labour”. The model of labour in the globalised world perpetuates a performance norm and assumes certain identity formations, and with the role of education re-inscribed as a training ground for the global workforce, there is an increasing alignment of academic work and identities with economic models of knowledge production, evaluation and compliance. The ‘good academic’ as the rationalised market subject must focus on adding economic value to the organisation and in the process the concept of community values and justice starts to sound effete.<sup>3</sup>

Here lies the new identity of the academic as part of the global workforce within the global university. This position is reinforced by the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) and the World Bank who have underscored the shape of education in the 21st century. They have, as Michael Peters writes (2001: 1), “stressed the significance of education and training as keys for participation in the new global knowledge economy for the development of ‘human resources’; for upskilling and increasing the competencies of workers; and for the production of research and scientific knowledge”. There is an implicit and explicit valuing of the rules of economic rationalism in the global marketplace with its positioning of the academic as an agent of progress. “Today knowledge and skills now stand alone as the only source of comparative advantage. They have become the key ingredient in the late twentieth century’s location of economic activity” (Thurow, 1996, cited in Peters, 2001: 1). So it is that the opportunities and constraints of academic labour are inscribed in these terms; and comparative advantage for academics as global ‘knowledge workers’ is sought via accountabilities of knowledge management.

Such processes are discursively engaged in social and personal lives that may be far removed from the logic of reason and impartiality prescribing the ethics of justice. In spite of women having to frequently combine “the ethics of care” with “the ethics of justice” in their everyday personal and academic lives, there is systemically a continuing privileging of the model of impartiality in academia. This is evidenced in the over-valuing of certain behaviours and knowledge practices.

The writings of Iris Marion Young can throw some light upon the abstract notions of impartiality. Applying the principles of moral theory, Young draws attention to the potential conflicts between such values and the politics of difference, which will always work against unity and consensus, when she writes (1990: 97):

I argue that the ideal of impartiality in moral theory expresses a logic of identity that seeks to reduce differences to unity. The stances of detachment and dispassion that supposedly produce impartiality are attained only by abstracting from the particularities of the situation, feeling, affiliation, and point of view. These particularities still operate, however, in the actual context of action.

Thus the ideal of impartiality generates a dichotomy between universal and particular, public and private, reason and passion ...

Finally, the ideal of impartiality serves ideological functions. It masks the ways in which the particular perspectives of dominant groups claim universality, and helps justify hierarchical decision making structures.

(Cited in Grierson, 2000: 419).

Young offers much that might clarify the ideological conditions of the new managerial state of the global university, and it may be that any systemic issue is already a deeply crafted ideological one.

## Concluding thoughts

This discussion has drawn from an increasing number of research papers and reports examining the situation for gender equity and the under-representation of women at senior academic levels. It is to be hoped that my research will add to this growing body of literature with the overall aim to improve the situation for women academics in Australia and New Zealand, and to ensure that equal opportunity and diversity policies will translate from rhetoric into effective action for women.

My aim in this paper was to raise questions and expose the political situations of gender equity, impediments to career progression, and under-representation of women in the higher levels of Australian universities, and to place these issues into the contexts of global economies and the managerialism of knowledge and its presentations. The discussion has raised complex issues of political lineages and present practices to do with research, diversity, promotion, non-traditional career paths for women and externalised expectations impinging upon academic identities.

Ultimately the discussion shows that conformity to a re-inscribed model of masculinist power formations in the interests of efficiency, time, and circumstance will become more pervasive if not contested and critiqued in the actual spaces of the workplace and academic lives. Furthermore, a privileging of knowledge as apolitical and neutralised will only reinforce the 'good academic' as the rationalist utility maximiser, if the "actual context of action" (Young, 1990) is overlooked and silenced. We are working under increasing pressures of time and space where problems are too easily obfuscated. New investments in a globalised workforce, knowledge as information, technology as truth, and research as the measure and master of individual performance are increasingly the institutionalised norms through which academic subjectivities are verified, validated and rewarded. Yet, within these assumptions and processes several lines of analysis and critique are possible.

It may be that, for women academics, greater visibility of workplace narratives is needed to reveal the conditions of practice and regulatory constraints in which they find themselves. I would advocate that such narratives, when linked to informed critique, may indeed go some way to review the impediments and illuminate the conditions of silencing, whenever and wherever they occur.

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## Notes

1. The increase in women appointments at Vice-Chancellor level appears to be a recent trend: of the eight women Vice-Chancellors in Australia three have been appointed in the past five years. Of the eight Vice-Chancellors in New Zealand only one is a woman, Professor Judith Kinnear, the first woman Vice-Chancellor to be appointed to a New Zealand university. Professor Kinnear commenced her appointment in 2003. Australian women Vice-Chancellors and their dates of appointment are: 2006, Professor Jeanette Hackett at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia; 2005, Professor Margaret Gardner at RMIT University, Melbourne; 2003, Professor Elizabeth Harman at Victoria University, Melbourne; Professor Sally Walker, Deakin University, Melbourne; and Professor Helen Garnett at Charles Darwin, Northern Territory; 2001, Professor Anne Edwards at Flinders University in South Australia; in 1998, Professor Janice Reid, University of Western Sydney; and in 1997, Professor Denise Bradley, University of South Australia.
2. Hyperreal: see the writings of French social philosopher, Jean Baudrillard and Italian semiologist, Umberto Eco. Hyper-real refers to the modes and effects of mass production and reproduction in contemporary culture, when the object, image, event or experience is so reproduced it replaces or supercedes the original and its reception becomes "more real than the real" (see Brooker, 1999: 121-122).
3. In a paper at Auckland University of Technology, 2000, Dr Charles Glassick proffered three underlying principles of 'community' as 'integrity, perseverance, courage'. Asking where the responsibility lies for university community learning, Glassick offered six principles for a university: purposefulness, freedom of expression leading to civility, a just community, disciplined community, celebrative community, and caring community. Dr Glassick was Senior Associate of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Visiting Scholar 2000 of Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.

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