

Vision 2020 - Understanding Generational Change and its Implications for Women in the Academic Workforce

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Abstract

Generational change is seen as a key challenge for many Australian universities. The ATN group of universities recognised the challenge this can bring to the sector at their 2005 annual conference and looked at the implications of an ageing academic workforce and, in particular, how this should be taken into account when planning for a sustainable future. Discussion of generational change needs to include consideration of succession development, recruitment and promotion, career choices, support for new academics and personal choices for work/life balance in the context of career planning and retirement. Generational change has become an important issue for strategic planning in universities.

In this paper we consider its relevance for individual women at different stages in their academic career. As a parallel activity to the broader institutional discussion of generational change we ran, in late 2005, two focus groups to gather information on attitudes to change from women academics of different ages. The starting point of our discussion, which aimed to take into account the strategic implications of generational change, was to ask what should the university of 2020 be like? How were the respondents considering their own contribution to leadership? How are women to become more visible in the university of the future?

The hypothesis being tested by this look into the future was: are current ideas about collegiality likely to be challenged by greater individualisation?

This paper will report on discussions from the focus groups. Our preliminary analysis shows that there is a gendered discussion that needs to be continued, especially for considering women's leadership and gender equity.

Keywords: Generational change, career choices, organisational change, collegiality.

Introduction

Our research into the implications of generational change for women in the academic workforce aims to broaden the agenda in discussions of gender and leadership in higher education. It is clear from information on institutional change, currently taking place in Australia, that collegial decision-making is no longer considered the norm for those entering the university workforce (Currie, Thiele & Harris 2002). There appear to be few opportunities for experienced women academics to pass on their knowledge of good practice to early career academics through collegial activities or more structured mentoring schemes. The Australian academic workforce is older than other working groups, with 'age heaping' at the upper end. It is also one of the least balanced workforces between male and female lecturers, with four men to every woman aged over 55 (Hugo 2005a: 18). There is also a younger 'lost generation' of potential, but unrealised, university academics, due to the lack of recruitment and growth in the academic workforce over the last 15 years (Hugo 2005a: 20).

Our research project was undertaken in late 2005 in the context of recent initiatives taken in the management of generational change at Curtin University of Technology (Curtin). Although our research is a response to local issues, the aim of this paper is to discuss issues that are more broadly relevant to women attaining leadership roles in universities. This paper therefore aims to make women's concerns visible in relation to the external and internal pressures being exerted on Australian higher education. Within this framework the paper considers views expressed by women of different academic 'generations' and explores possible strategies for change and improvement.

Background

The Australian Technology Network (ATN) Universities' Conference 'Building Partnerships – Finding Solutions', held in Melbourne, in February 2005, examined the implications of the ageing Australian academic workforce and generational change for the ATN universities.¹ Conference discussion of generational change in Australian universities took place against the backdrop of increasing globalisation of education and research, and recent changes in the national agenda for higher education. There appeared to be general agreement at the conference that understanding and 'managing' generational change was central to universities' strategic repositioning to meet the challenges ahead. In particular, the Commonwealth Government's decision to set up the Research Quality Framework (RQF) through the Department of Science, Education and Training (DEST) (DEST 2005c) was seen as being of immense significance to the ATN universities.

At the time of the Conference the Government was only weeks away from publishing an Issues Paper, *Building University Diversity: Future Approval and Accreditation Processes for Australian Higher Education (Building University Diversity)*. The main thrust of *Building University Diversity* was to mandate an examination of the combination of teaching,

¹ The Australian Technology Network (ATN) consists of five universities, Curtin University of Technology, University of South Australia, RMIT University, University Technology Sydney, and Queensland University of Technology. Located in each mainland state they teach more than 170,000 students, which is almost 20 per cent of the Australian university system. 13,700 members of staff are employed in these universities.
<http://www.atn.edu.au>

scholarship and research that should define universities (DEST 2005a). *Building University Diversity* built on the work of the 2004 Guthrie Report, which examined university protocols, and on the package of higher education reforms contained in the 2003 *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future*, (DEST 2005b). It was understood that research-intensive universities would benefit significantly, in financial terms, from the reforms, which were to be introduced into the Australian higher education sector. The external (global and Governmental) pressures were combining to compel ATN universities to review their fundamental structures, re-examine the nature of academic work and evaluate their role within the Australian community and the broader economy.

Graham Hugo has identified four defining elements of the current Australian academic workforce. In addition to slow growth in that workforce, three factors are demographic: 'age heaping', a mature age structure and an imbalanced gender ratio (Hugo 2005a). Today Australian academics aged in their 40s and 50s outnumber those in their 20s and 30s by 31.1 per cent. There is a 'lost generation' of potential academics who would currently be in their 20s and 30s and an increase in the percentage of staff aged over 50. (Hugo 2005b: 7). Between one-fifth and one-third of academic staff members will be lost to universities during the next decade (Hugo 2005a: 20).

During the last decade, a mature workforce was able to absorb a one-third increase in teaching loads, as the student to teacher ratios increased from 15.6 per cent (in 1996) to 20.8 per cent (in 2003). In this context, academics' experience and know-how was important for dealing with rapid change. With those academics leaving the workforce, universities will have to rely on younger staff with different skills and, as Hugo suggests, make sure that women are more involved in universities (Hugo 2005b)

Senior management at Curtin adopted a proactive and pragmatic approach to the challenges discussed above. On 10 February 2005 Professor Lance Twomey, Curtin's Vice-Chancellor announced a strategic positioning exercise for 2006-2008. That exercise would include the creation of a more intensive research culture and the critical review of Curtin courses and programs: closures were to be expected where there was, for example, declining student demand or course duplication. Professor Twomey informed staff that: 'Research intensity will define universities of real quality into the future' (Twomey 2005a).

More significantly, Curtin's repositioning exercise was to include a staff redundancy and retirement program, combined with a recruitment program. The implementation of a redundancy and retirement program placed generational change within the context of Curtin's imperative to develop a more research-intensive culture. In order to judge whether or not they had a future at the University, members of the academic staff needed to reflect seriously on their research capabilities,

Around 30 members of staff were given the opportunity of retiring, which provoked opposition and protest, both from the individuals concerned and from the academic staff union. Subsequent discussions between the union and senior management officers in respect of that initiative were expanded to consider the implications of the 2005 Higher Education Workplace Reform Requirements (HEWRRS) and the introduction of the RQF (Curtin University of Technology 2005; Twomey 2005b). The general expectation was that the RQF would create a three-tiered system, in which universities would be ranked according to their research performance. All members of Curtin's staff were informed of the University's expectation that Curtin would position itself in the top tier.

In the University context, generational change became a management issue – a strategic approach being adopted for the immediate future (the next two or three years). However, individual academics, naturally enough, took a longer-term view. It was important to consider the issue of personal work/life balance in the context of career planning, promotion and retirement.

In that context, the question arises as to what should universities offer, if they are to become more equitable environments for the women currently working in them. In addition, what will attract more women to become the academics of the future? In order to look at the issues of generational change for women in universities, a longer time span (considerably longer than two or three years) needs to be considered. For that reason, the development of a vision for female academics in the year 2020 suggested itself. By canvassing women's aspirations for 2020, it was hoped that a broader understanding of the current issues would emerge.

Academic work is now conducted in a turbulent environment of constant change in response to the forces of globalisation and corporatisation (Churchman 2006; Marginson & Considine 2000). For many mid-career academics, the experiences gained from working in education over the last 15 to 20 years require serious critical reflection and analysis in planning for the future. This reflective and analytical process should also be instructive for newer, early career female academics.

Recent publications on women in higher education have discussed gender and identity formation in the context of that increasingly globalised and corporatised university environment (Carrington & Pratt 2003; Chesterman, Ross-Smith & Peters 2005; Churchman 2006; Currie, Thiele & Harris 2002; Probert 2005; Skelton 2004, 2005; Willis 2001). In particular, Christine Skelton has examined generational change in detail and used Ulrich Beck's model of the 'individualised individual' to discuss information derived from interviews with 22 female academics in universities in the United Kingdom. Skelton grouped these academics broadly for discussion purposes into 'young academics' (those aged 29-34 years) and 'vintage academics' (those aged 45- 50 years). Beck argues that the transformation from an industrialised to a globalised society inter alia liberates women and creates fundamental changes in the nature of work. People work flexi-time, part-time, on short contracts and/or juggle different types of work at the one time, thereby becoming 'individualised individuals', authors of their own biographies (Skelton 2005: 87). Skelton acknowledged the need to understand the inherent complexity of this discussion, finding that 'the female academic women showed 'choices' and 'self-interest' that are bounded by social class identities, with personal concerns over equity issues, and with lack of opportunities; all of which are far removed from the idea that an individual/woman is able to simply plan their (sic) biography' (Skelton 2005: 15).

As there were few studies of women and generational change we felt it was very timely to examine the subject in the context of an Australian university.

Methods - Research Sample

The peer-learning project described in this paper was initiated to take the discourse further in our own teaching Divisions at Curtin – that is, the Division of Humanities (Humanities) and the Curtin Business School (CBS). The project arose from our participation in the ATN's

Women's Executive Development (WEXDEV) Leadership Capability Workshop in Melbourne in February 2005. The peer-learning project, which was developed by ATN WEXDEV following the example of work at the University of Western Australia, (de Vries 2005: 37) had the following objectives:

- to allow individuals to explore practical management issues and report back to the group;
- to encourage the learning to take place with previous members of the Leadership Capability Workshops, so that each institution develops a group expertise and a network of women focusing on management issues.

We took advantage of the opportunity presented by this task to explore leadership and management issues with Suzette's female colleagues from Humanities and Stephanie's female colleagues from CBS. To that end, we jointly developed the concept of 'Vision 2020' initiative (pun intended), which would canvass female career planning in our two Divisions for the next 15 years.

The objectives of the Vision 2020 initiative were to learn from our colleagues, to share and debate ideas, and generally to gain collaboratively a deeper understanding of issues of immediate and pressing interest to us all. We would report to our respective Executive Deans and at the follow-up WEXDEV Leadership Capability Workshop to be held in November 2005. This, we hoped, would create a cycle of learning: reflection, analysis, planning and action.

The primary mechanism for effecting Vision 2020 was to set up two focus group sessions, one for 'early/mid career' female academics and the second for 'other' female academics in Humanities and CBS. Such broad categorization was deliberate, permitting self-selection into groups. However, for the latter group, we hoped to attract women who had been in the workforce for at least 10-15 years, and who had extensive experience of higher education.

The formal title for the focus groups was 'Vision 2020: Women in the Academic Workforce.' The electronic flyer posed the overarching question 'What are your aspirations for 2020?' Subsumed under that broad query were a number of discussion questions about academic identity and choice, identification of career issues or obstacles to success, achieving a work/life balance and change management. These questions provided the framework for the thematic discussion presented in the next section of this paper.

To emphasise the intended collegiality of the project, we advised prospective participants that the focus groups were intended to be informal social and networking occasions, as well as opportunities to freely express views and concerns.

The first focus group held was for 'early/mid career' academics (group (A)) and took place in September 2005. It attracted fifteen participants: ten from CBS and five from Humanities. The participants comprised ten tenured lecturers, two research associates, two sessional lecturers and one support staff member. Six of the participants were aged less than 35 years, nine were aged between 35 to mid 50s.

The second focus group, for 'other' female academics (group (B)) was held in November 2005. It attracted eleven participants, and one observer from Curtin's central administration with an interest in equity issues. This group included five tenured lecturers (one an Associate

Professor), one research associate, one research associate/sessional lecturer and four sessional staff. Six participants were from CBS and five were from Humanities: participants' ages ranged from early 30s to mid 50s.

Both focus group meetings lasted one and a half hours and an independent attendee took notes during each meeting.

Responses to Focus Questions

1. What is your understanding of academic identity and choices of focus within the university - scholarly teaching and research, managerial or entrepreneurial?

In both group (A) and group (B), an academic post was generally accepted as an attractive means of balancing home and work. However, participants in both groups commented that any 'choices' within an academic role were still limited by the need to balance teaching, research and administrative work. Several participants, who were late in entering academic work, were completing PhDs at the same time as performing teaching and administrative duties. Generally, entrepreneurial options (such as engaging in consultancy) were seen to be of low priority.

Group (A) members remarked that they felt the pressure of 'having to be experts' and of having to 'do everything.' They described a 'lack of know-how' in approaching academic and administrative leaders and in finding ways to achieve objectives. None appeared to have access to a mentor to see them through this uneasiness, or to assist them in redressing their perceived lack of interpersonal skills. They felt unsupported in their efforts to establish ways of building on their existing strengths and skills.

One attendee noted: 'The career path is too narrow, it does not give us opportunities to progress.' The 'norm' was perceived to be a male-style career where, typically, career breaks occur less frequently. Participants agreed that the curriculum vitae of a man with an uninterrupted employment record may be regarded as superior to those of a woman with similar qualifications and experience, but whose employment history contains interruptions.

2. What are the current internal and external drivers for change for higher education?

We expected, by this question, to elicit participants' observations and perspectives on the large-scale changes occurring within higher education. Both groups were demonstrably well aware of the external issues, and in particular the Commonwealth Government's reforms. Many members of group (A) appeared to feel powerless in respect of internal drivers for change, particularly, the perceived expectation to perform strongly in a wide range of academic and administrative activities.

The groups' discussions focused very largely on the immediate to short term, rather than the medium to long term, implications of HEWRRS, the RQF and other external drivers for change. Participants appeared to experience Curtin's strategic re-positioning agenda as intensifying the existing pressures to 'do everything.' At the same time, the University's strong focus on increasing and improving research outcomes created a perception that the

range of strategies which participants could employ to build a successful career was becoming narrower.

3. What factors are affecting your career progression? Are there obstacles to career success?

We note that women at Associate Professor and above were under represented in group B (one other than the facilitators) and that this may have narrowed the discussion on this question. Members of both groups reflected upon their own personal qualities in responding to this question. Participants identified a number of career 'blocks', most significantly feeling/being generally unsupported and unmentored. They experienced a lack of 'real' academic teams and identified 'silo' cultures within Divisions. The broader University's culture was described as being one of 'every man for himself,' and the prevailing ethos perceived as inherently competitive rather than collegial. Hidden or implied discrimination, 'where men are expected to dominate and women to perform a support function,' was deplored.

Group (A) also identified a lack of the valuing of multi-skilled staff, inadequate professional induction training, and stress resulting from high teaching loads (teaching being perceived to be insufficiently valued). Sessional staff members found entry into a full-time academic post very difficult. Financial constraints limited access to conference attendance or to opportunities to update professional skills in industry. A lack of trust on the part of some participants was evident: one example being a male colleague having encouraged a group participant to 'do the hackwork' for a proposal, and then taking the credit for it. Another participant felt professionally and personally compromised by a particular breach of confidentiality. Group (A) members commented on their reluctance to self-promote and difficulty in building relationships with peers and line managers.

Group (B) members noted that being a 'yes person' and/or being over-committed to pastoral care, lacking in confidence and negotiating skills often 'held you back.' A late entry into academia (for whatever reason) was perceived to be a handicap.

4. How are you achieving work/life balance?

The participants of both groups indicated that they experienced great difficulty in achieving a satisfactory work/life balance. The reasons for this included a 'lack of choices' in determining workload: for example, larger units may be taught in many locations, including overseas locations, and create an extremely high administrative load. Group (A) suggested that competing demands mandate a 'fragmented life.' A member of group (B) expressed resentment about the personal sacrifices required to meet the demands of the workplace.

5. Can you describe your strategies for career progression towards 2020?

Members of group (B) expressed quite clear long-term career objectives including obtaining Masters or PhD degrees, becoming an Associate Professor, or Head of Department and 'winning a couple of ARC grants.'

Although members of both groups tended to describe the workplace and work requirements in quite negative terms many positive strategies to progress personal careers were suggested. These strategies could be implemented at a variety of levels (personal, Divisional and institutional) and included:

(a) Personal Strategies

- Stay focused on your own goals (for example, avoid distracters such as committee work);
- Ensure that you receive all the workplace benefits (such as permitted research days) to which you are entitled;
- Lobby for greater administrative support;
- Find a strong ally, 'if possible outside your Division,' someone who will keep your confidences and vice versa;
- Consider a career change for a certain period (for example, taking a secondment from the University to work overseas), if family circumstances permit.

(b) Divisional

- Build relationships with/develop ideas with your Executive Dean;
- Form Divisional 'Women's Groups,' comprising general staff as well as academic staff, which can prepare position papers and approach the relevant Executive Dean directly;
- Develop strategies to break down intra-Divisional 'silos.'

(c) Institutional

- Investigate what women in the Divisions are doing, how they can be assisted to develop their long-term career paths;
- Build relationships with female Vice-Chancellors and Pro Vice-Chancellors, using the AVCC *Action Plan for Women* as a framework;
- Develop alternative structures and philosophies to improve the current culture, such as expanded affirmative action strategies.

General Observations on the Focus Group Discussions

It was striking that, in broad terms, the participants in group (A) were of similar ages to the participants in group (B). Thus, any relevance of the participants' physical ages to the descriptors 'early/mid-career female academics' and 'other female academics' had to be seriously questioned. This may be contrasted with Skelton's age-related analysis of female academics (Skelton 2004, 2005). Many participants in our two groups had come to academia after working in business, industry or the creative professions, and/or after periods of child raising. Overall, the majority of attendees considered themselves to be 'early/mid career academics.' Accordingly, most of the commentary, which follows, is based on a cross-group analysis. This has been necessary in order to create an understanding of the generational issues requiring consideration.

First, though, some broad observations based upon group membership. Generally, members of group (A) appeared to be more problem-focussed and less certain of achieving career progression than members of group (B). Members of group (A) appeared to be generally quite pessimistic about their immediate and medium-term future as academics: this may have made it more difficult to think strategically about the longer term (the year 2020). Members

of group (B) demonstrated a clearer sense of goal-orientation, seemed more confident and optimistic about the future, and did not appear too constrained by the internal cultural issues or the internal and external drivers for change.

Participants made repeated references to endemic competitiveness, 'male domination,' 'silos', heavy teaching loads, systemic disadvantage and manipulation. Many participants keenly felt the effects of a lack of mentoring, financial and/or other forms of support. Feelings of powerlessness, distrust and alienation were strongly expressed. However, at the same time loyalty to and an apparent intention to remain at Curtin, rather than seek a position elsewhere, was implicit in most of the discussion. One participant expressed, with great enthusiasm, the view that she 'loved Curtin, and loved working here!'

The participants appeared to interpret the University's repositioning statements as requiring the achievement of excellence in every facet of academic life. Participants lamented the burden of completing a PhD while fulfilling the other demands of academic life, and endeavouring to maintain a personal or family life. (It appeared that none of the participants had completed a PhD prior to embarking on an academic career.) Thus, the making of work-related choices, *and* attaining a satisfying work/life balance, appeared to be regarded as unaffordable luxuries.

Participants were able to readily and clearly identify obstacles to career progression; but factors that would assist career progression appeared more difficult to discern. We therefore realised that there is the need for senior academics to share their experiences, and their strategies for success, with their junior colleagues.

Implications for understanding generational change

Our objective had been to shine some light on the implications of the rapidly changing university sector for our female colleagues, and in particular responses to generational change. However, it appeared that a combination of several factors diminished some participants' ability – or perhaps their desire - to articulate a clear vision for themselves as female academics in 2020.

First, the concept of collegiality appeared to exist largely as an abstract one for most participants. Advice to 'stay away from committee work' and to look for an ally 'outside the Division' was received with interest, and apparently tacit endorsement, by others in the group. Yet clearly such advice reinforces the culture of the individual, one in which notions of mutual support and encouragement are deemed either irrelevant or illusory. Our findings therefore echo other research on women in universities (Carrington & Pratt 2003; Chesterman, Ross-Smith & Peters 2005; Churchman 2006; Currie, Thiele & Harris 2002; Probert 2005; Skelton 2004, 2005; Willis 2001).

Secondly, the participants' focus on identifying ways to cope with the existing demands upon them, and with imminent changes, such as the RQF, largely dominated the discussion. Churchman has suggested that academics in Australia's new corporate university are struggling to find their identity (Churchman 2006: 5). The concern, apprehension and frustration expressed by the participants in our groups bears out Churchman's observation. Strong leadership is required if female academics are to rise to the challenges, and make the most of the opportunities, which generational change presents.

Thirdly, and as indicated earlier, the scarcity of input into the discussion from senior staff – Professors and Associate Professors – was a serious loss to the debate. We realised that more work needs to be done on the significance of succession planning. Generational change is therefore difficult to discuss in the absence of those who, by dint of generational change, will be replaced in the next 15 years.

As a consequence, we were not able to fully reflect upon a vision for Curtin, and the participants' role within it at 2020. Could Curtin's strongly articulated, and widely discussed, strategic repositioning agenda for 2005-2008 have impacted negatively on the desire, or the ability, for the participants to focus on longer-term strategic career planning? Certainly, there appeared to be signs of 'emotional overload' particularly on the part of some of the younger academics in the groups.

In the short-term, it appears that an effective way of reaching female academics in both Humanities and CBS, and offering all a vehicle for discussion and support is to continue the dialogue commenced in the focus groups. This could occur by continuing to hold cross-Divisional, open-invitation discussion sessions or to set up, as suggested, structured or semi-structured Women's Groups. Currently CBS is exploring ways in which a more structured mentoring system might be implemented.

Conclusions

As a result of conducting this research project we conclude that collegiality is an important issue for any discussion of generational change. Collegiality has been discussed in many other studies of women in higher education and we have found it to be both a 'lack' for many women in their current work, but we have also found it to be something to practice through the learning experience of having developed a peer-learning project that embraces research as a core output as well as our own (and the group's) learning.

Through this study we have provided some evidence that the 'individualisation' of the workplace is apparent but is not empowering the women who responded in our focus groups. They are not able to take advantage of the individualised workplace to create their own biographies (Skelton 2004, 2005).

We found that many women academics feel 'invisible' and lack the tools to become visible. Yet Curtin has a women's program, a well articulated and documented equal opportunities procedures and has been honoured as an employer of choice for women from 2002 by the Equal Opportunities for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA). The support structures are in place but how do we link women to them? Women are still caught up in multi-skilling work roles; they feel conflicted interests despite family-friendly policies.

Academic careers are not (or are no longer) a set of logical, consecutive steps but often now have previously consecutive steps being done concurrently. Thus, the going may be hard for those who think of themselves as early career academics. There are different backgrounds, a variety of entries in and out of other workplaces; in short a rich mix of experiences within women's expertise. These are in danger of not being picked up, appreciated, and nurtured.

We have also found that, in our day-to-day work, we can be blind to the correlations we make between age and career stages and progression. We need to un-couple age and career progression. More examination is needed of what this means for promotion and what is valued from academics.

The implications for further action include:

- the need to engage senior female academics in the debate, and an understanding of why they appear to be silent on it;
- an analysis of why Curtin's Ethics Equity & Social Justice office and its policies are not effective for those women who attended the focus groups, and how this can be turned around;
- in what ways can the competitive, individualised workplace be made more collegiate ?
- how can mentoring systems be developed, implemented and sustained within the Schools/Departments and Divisions ?
- how can women be heard without creating wider perceptions of a 'culture of complaint'?
- how can the participants' concerns be more fully examined, tested and raised at levels which will engage the wider university?

Ongoing discussion of these areas will further develop our understanding of generational change in universities. A vision for women academics in 2020 is yet to be perceived with clarity: what is needed is for all of us to fully grasp the issues, and then focus on seeking solutions.

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