

Marketing Graduate Women's Skills in a Changing Labour Market

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The labour market is changing for graduates as for other workers, and with it the skills necessary for employment and for leadership roles, both within Higher Education, and in the wider world of work. It is in this changing market that there may be great opportunities for women.

At the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in Paris in October 1998, Professor Ulrich Teichler, a keynote speaker and leader in the thematic debate on the Requirements of the World of Work spoke of many aspects around the central question of what higher education is expected to deliver, and how it should respond to needs. An emerging consensus is that Higher Education is expected to continue to regard as a key issue, fair access to people of different socio-biographic back grounds, especially in times of tightening public support for higher education. Further there is a need to diversify structurally so that there is choice of study and of curricula. Greater attention should be devoted to generic competencies, social skills and personality development, and to developing entrepreneurial skills and initiative. Facilities for Lifelong Learning need to be improved, a need emphasised by the fact that specialised professional knowledge is now becoming obsolete more quickly than in the past. Students must be prepared for growing economic and societal globalisation and internationalisation, and be provided with an increasing variety of means of education beyond classroom teaching and learning, for example, through out-of-class communication, counselling, the provision of various forms of work and life experience, or job-search support. Literacy must be encouraged in areas of knowledge which form the basis for various professional skills, for example in new technologies, and regular modes of communication should be established between higher education and the world of work. This is necessary in order to become well-informed of the expectations of the outside world and to enable planning of measures to prepare students for indeterminate future job tasks, new employment patterns, and to make contributions to innovation in society. These requirements presage big changes for students, staff and decision-makers. If it is generally acknowledged that universities have to be flexible in preparing students to cope with this rapidly changing scene, this may present opportunities for women to have a greater role in higher education at all levels, since they have the special skills suitable for the task. For women to benefit from these opportunities it is necessary for these special skills to be clearly recognised and, as it were, *marketed* as a *brand* with an identity of their own.

Shortage of Women in Leadership Roles

There is a continuing under-representation of women graduates at decision-making levels. Women represent 34% of academic staff in Australia, but the proportion of females above Senior Lectureship level is only 13% (Burton 1997). This is intrinsically unjust, but it also means that there is not a critical mass of women in leadership roles. Achievement of this should be a major goal. Decision-making bodies have previously been dominated by males,

due partly to a shortage of women in senior positions and certain structural constraints in universities mediating against them being admitted to such bodies. The self-perpetuating nature of committees was a factor in this. Over the past ten years equal opportunity action has produced changes and there are now more women in decision-making roles in universities. However, progress is slow and equitable representation of women will at the present rate require 150 years. One of the problems is that female students tend not to visualise themselves as potential leaders; there are insufficient women in these positions to act as inspiring role models so that there is not the autocatalytic effect that rapid progress requires. The special skills that women are able to contribute tend to be overlooked because many are unaware of them. An important need is to draw attention to these skills. It would seem that universities must have equitable representation of women on decision-making bodies as an important goal if they are to respond adequately to the needs of the 21st century.

Do Women have Special Skills?

Web thinking leads to flexibility. There is evidence that women can bring different approaches and ideas to the consideration of administrative and academic issues when they are involved in decisionmaking bodies (Ozga & Walker 1995). In particular, women show high levels of sensitivity and flexibility in problem solving. They also appear to draw the attention of committees to areas of concern which are of significance to women, but which may not be considered significant by men. A recent book documents many scientific studies showing biological and psychological differences between women and men that may explain subtle differences in the way they organise their thoughts. Fisher concludes "They integrate more details of the world around them, details ranging from the nuances of body posture to the position of objects in a room" (1999, 5). In general, as women make decisions they weigh more variables, consider more options and outcomes, recall more points of view, and see more ways to proceed. They integrate, generalise and synthesise. And women, on average, tolerate ambiguity better than men do - probably because they visualise more of the factors involved in any issue. ... in short, women tend to think in webs of interrelated factors, not straight lines. I call this female manner of thought 'web thinking'. As a general rule, men tend to focus on one thing at a time. Men are good at compartmentalising their attention, to tune out extraneous stimuli. Their thinking process is, on average, more channelled. (1999, 5) It is certainly not always the case that women offer these kinds of input. And it is not the case that individual men cannot demonstrate similar qualities and concerns. However, on balance it does appear that women favour styles of participation and modes of input which imply increased creativity and flexibility. Such qualities in decision-making, however, need to be marketed positively in the higher education sector, since they are sometimes presented negatively in terms of women being frustrating when they present an array of variables, and by being categorised as notorious for changing their minds.

Team Playing

One of the major and, it is good to report, unstoppable, changes taking place over the past two decades has been the increase in

female student enrolments at university. Currently, female enrolments slightly outnumber those of males. Furthermore, the past

decade has seen the gradual softening of the gender divide between faculties and disciplines, so that more females are entering fields of academic study previously dominated by men, such as medicine, law and engineering, and some males are entering fields such as nursing, previously a female domain. Side by side with such changes, increasing numbers of women have been taking up academic staff appointments, both in traditionally female fields and in some non-traditional ones. While the numbers in science and technology are still comparatively low, especially those entering for higher degrees in disciplines other than biology and health sciences, these changes mean that the composition of university populations, staff and students, has changed. It seems logical that the composition of decision-making bodies in the universities should reflect this new state of affairs by adjusting to feminine management styles. Women appear to favour less hierarchical decision-making. Feminine ways of work as described by Fisher involve a style of management that is based on sharing power, on inclusion, consultation, consensus and collaboration. Women work interactively and swap information more freely than men do. They give more praise - and praise is more important to women than to men. Women tend to give suggestions rather than giving orders. They take a win-win attitude while men take a win or lose attitude. Men are less ready to share information. Instead of focusing on personal relationships men are more likely to pay attention to who is dominant over whom. (1999, 32) Women currently make up 43% of the total work force. The female students now studying at a university will enter a world in which more of the traditional gender divisions in work will fall away even further. Universities need to be in a position to prepare students for this, especially as the participation of women in all sectors of public life will probably increase further. They will be in a better position to do this if decision-making in tertiary institutions fully includes the representation of women.

Labour Management in Universities

Over the next two decades a number of trends in work are expected to continue. There will be an increasing trend towards casual, part-time and contract positions in all sectors of the workforce, including professional and managerial fields. Traditionally these forms of work have been more associated with women than with men. Also, lifestyle choices, and the need to balance career and family are influencing the work pattern of both men and women. Universities need to respond sensitively and creatively to these changes in the workforce and the nature of work, which may mean some adjustment to professional degrees, particularly with regard to multi-skilling. The input of women decision-makers in terms of analysis and insight could make an important contribution to this in determining how universities respond. They can certainly be expected to support flexibility in the work place and strengthen programmes designed to balance work and home life. Women's verbal skills and natural talent for handling people should also make them valuable in managing labour relations such as mediation and arbitration. Fisher develops this idea in terms of the social antennae of women always being on. She explains:

Women are built for mind reading. Touch, hearing, smell, taste, vision: all of women's senses are, in some respects, more finely tuned than those of men. Women have a knack for decoding your emotions by looking at your face. They swiftly decipher your mood from your body posture and gestures. They remember more of the things in the room or office around you, putting you in social context. Many even have a genetic advantage for interpreting the nuances of social interaction, what neuroscientists call 'executive' social skills. (1999, 84)

Women in Teaching

The contributions that women make because of greater caring skills, and the skills acquired in the management of home and family are undervalued, indeed often actively despised. If time off is taken to have a baby, the loss of peer esteem is frequently an added pressure on rejoining the work force, especially because there is no real opportunity for them to upgrade, update or catch up. Yet these skills are just what are needed to impart to the student of to-morrow the social skills and personality development needed. Fisher relates these skills to women being more emotionally expressive and having greater capacity for feeling and expressing empathy, to them having longer attention spans and more patience than men (1999, 125), and traces these qualities to the need for perseverance, patience and tolerance in order to successfully rear children (1999, 123-26).

Referring to women's verbal fluency, Fisher concludes that: Women will come to dominate many sectors of the communications and education fields. With their contextual perspective, their mental flexibility, their imagination, and their superb linguistic faculties, they will enrich our airwaves, print media, and classrooms with more diversity and range of subject matter, more intricate discussions of issues and ideas, and a more detailed and sensitive depiction of minorities, foreigners, women and human relationships. (1999, 57)

Women as Entrepreneurs

The success of women in small business is now a recognised phenomenon (National Foundation of Women Business Owners, 7). It is reported that female business owners stress intuitive thinking, creativity, sensitivity, and personal values, and are thus more able to switch among multiple tasks. Women's abilities to think contextually, to weigh more variables, consider more alternatives, pursue more options, and introduce new issues have been said to bring balance and innovation to the office world (Fisher 1999, 15).

How can These Skills be Marketed in the Higher Education Sector?

Let us relate the skills and perspectives that women bring to leadership and teaching roles to the qualities that higher education is expected to deliver, as defined at the beginning (Teichler 1998). Do women graduates have what it takes to be leaders, to occupy decision-making positions, in producing the required outcomes? The contributions that women make to teaching because of greater caring skills, and the skills acquired in the management of home and family are recognised but undervalued. These skills, sometimes called *emotional intelligence* (Coleman 1995) can easily be translated into leadership and teaching

roles especially when the outcome for students is expected to be better social skills and personality development (Teichler 1998). The importance that will be placed on encouraging literacy will also be an important outcome where feminine linguistic skill is recognised (Teichler 1998). What other skills and perspectives can women bring to leadership roles? We have seen that there is evidence that women can bring different approaches and ideas to the consideration of administrative and academic issues when they are involved in decisionmaking bodies (Ozga & Walker 1995). In particular, women appear to favour less hierarchical decision-making, and often show high levels of sensitivity and flexibility in problem solving. The outcome for universities to diversify structurally so that there is choice of study and of curricula might be said to need such input (Teichler 1998). Their skills as entrepreneurs, referred to above, have obvious advantages in a climate where universities are under increasing pressure to explore opportunities in the corporate sector (Teichler 1998). We have also seen how women may be valuable in helping universities to respond sensitively and creatively to changes in the workforce, to new employment patterns and contributions to innovation in society (Teichler 1998). They will be able to contribute significantly to how universities might respond appropriately in terms of maintaining a satisfied, productive and committed workforce. Women also appear to draw the attention of committees to areas of concern which are of significance to women, but which may not be considered significant by men. The outcome of fair access to people of different socio-biographic backgrounds may fall into this category (Teichler 1998).

Obstacles Women Face

Lack of expertise in new technologies

For the outcomes listed above, a woman's skills may be just what are needed; for others she will be at a disadvantage if the requirements are not recognised in time to remedy shortcomings. One such limitation may be in the increasing reliance on information technologies for communication and information search and retrieval, as well as the further development of new technologies for experimental simulation and modelling. Since the development of these new technologies women have had rather an ambiguous relationship to these forms (Spender 1995). Many of the newer computer and technology applications in industry and business, however, are targeted at sectors of the professional and managerial workforce in which women are highly represented. Clearly it will be in the interests of future employees in professional and managerial fields to become fully competent in using new technologies. Yet there is evidence that women on tertiary campuses are not availing themselves of training programs nor undertaking postgraduate research involving new technologies, in anywhere near the numbers that male students are (Spender 1995). Indeed there is a decline in women entering computer science courses where a hostile male-dominated computer culture has been demonstrated (Nielsen et al. 1999). It is in the interests of universities to monitor this situation and to encourage female students to develop a positive attitude towards new technologies in order to prepare them for indeterminate future job tasks that may well need literacy in areas of knowledge which form the basis for various professional skills, for example in new technologies (Teichler 1998).

Globalisation

One of the required outcomes for higher education where women may not be able to contribute adequately is to prepare students for the growing economic and societal globalisation and internationalization (Teichler 1998). However this is seen more as a societal factor, and one that a change in attitude can address, as explained below.

Resistance to change

"New" management styles which have been enthusiastically taken up by the private sector to increase productivity and efficiency have been described as particularly compatible with the kinds of administrative and management styles favoured by women as workers and managers. *Anticipatory Action Learning* (AAL) is a transformative

approach to negotiating the future that incorporates, then transcends, strategic thinking ("New Learning" 1999).

Action Learning

(AL), precursor of AAL, provides a way of de-layering management levels, introducing self-managed teams with a focus on empowerment, and removing formal lines of communication and hierarchy, relying instead on individuals and teams to form the networks that help their work. This alters the usual priorities from action to one where practitioners can reflect and assess strategies as they evolve. The process is plan, act, observe, reflect, revise. AAL brings together the tenets of AL and post-strategic work that when operating together create fundamental principles of respect, open-mindedness and integrity that can translate across crises and cultures. Strategy is part of the problem because it uses only the intellect and limits chaos and complexity. Therefore it also limits all the other ways in which we know and understand the world, intuition, instincts and through relationships. This process would clearly fit in well with female abilities to communicate well, cope with variables, work as a team, nurture relationships

and to care and share. We are also often told nowadays that these qualities can enhance business performance. Such women's skills however need to be marketed in the higher education sector. Instead of some (men's) perception of women as "difficult," "not to be trusted to do the expected," "going about things in the wrong way" and "not sensible," it is time that women were marketed positively for the skills they do have. At present there is a contradiction in what is being promoted as new management styles and the result of surveys such as one in the UK recently which found that women not only had to behave like their male colleagues to succeed, but also frequently had to be tougher and meaner. This UK study ("Why must ..." 1999) showed that basic differences between the sexes were largely non-existent among managers. This agrees with a correlative study which found that when men dominate numerically within an organisation, women are less likely to lead with an interpersonally oriented style (Eagley & Johnson 1990). Again, Kanter (1977) has found that "token" women alter their style to lower their visibility and reduce the possibility of sex stereotyping. Perhaps companies are slow in learning the lessons of increased productivity and efficiency reported above by businesses such as Dutch Shell embracing Anticipatory Action Learning. They fail to acknowledge that their vision is one that is culturally bound and informed by male Judaic-Christian traditions. There is nothing wrong with

these traditions except that they are very different from Confucian, Islamic, Indigenous and Hindu world views ("New Learning" 1999). And they often do not translate across cultures, or genders for that matter.

Penalties: paying the price for "walking the walk" (Batge)

Findings such as those of Eagley and Kanter have implications for women's mental health. A study published last year tested the assertion that "when men dominate numerically in an industry, women in that industry experience pressure to alter their leadership style, which in turn impacts on their mental health" (Gardiner & Tiggeman

1999). It was found that both gender and the gender ratio of the industry influence leadership style, stress and mental health. Women in male-dominated industries reported worse mental health when they retained their interpersonally oriented leadership style. On the other hand men in male-dominated industries reported better mental health when they utilised a people-oriented leadership style.

How can These Obstacles be Overcome?

Awareness raising

The impact of globalisation and its effects on the graduate women's career market has not yet been fully appreciated. A process of awareness raising is essential. Many professional women are likely to join multinationals in the future - and this requires a different preparation and re-thinking re degrees, experience, career, family etc. To coin a phrase it seems we are now heading for both *education sans frontiers* and *employment sans frontiers*. In other words, more and more people - including women - will be asked to think internationally in relation to their education and work than ever before; courses already available on the Internet will be a feature of this. This will be most obvious in the commercial areas, e.g. international business, management etc., but conceivably possible or likely for any area. With globalisation and education as the focus for the present IFUW Study and Action Programme, members are being well served in awareness raising. Perhaps we should be helping women to come to terms with this new and emerging internationalisation trend. Women will not necessarily have more problems than men that were not already apparent in the last decade - just that at the moment they are probably setting their sights on local or national educational opportunities and jobs - and not thinking of the international possibilities. This would also mean that women's international networks will become much more important and foreshadow an increased role for IFUW. NGOs often tend to focus on women who are missing out on educational opportunities at the most basic level - but if they also make sure that women operate equally on the international scene, this may afford women more serious chances to be influential for the betterment of all women - and men. How can NGOs such as IFUW reaffirm the basic benefits of the enhanced participation of women in higher education and in relation to the development process? It may well be that an active campaign is needed to assert women's qualities (14). Women need to be marketed as valuable long-term employees with a laudable work ethic, and ones who can offer the following qualities and attributes:

- stability
- reliability

- efficiency
- commitment
- loyalty
- task focus
- performance orientation
- dedication
- a strong sense of responsibility
- maturity
- organisational skills
- interpersonal communication skills
- understanding, tolerance and empathy
- the ability to work autonomously

In certain cultural contexts, women do not have an equal opportunity to enter higher education or to compete with men. In Australia there are major perceptual barriers currently at play ("Employer attitudes"), especially in relation to women and families, such as:

- sick children
- pregnancy
- a "knee-jerk" negative reaction to any lengthy absence from the work force, such as staying at home to raise a family.

Any campaign to accommodate women's needs as primary caregivers needs to take into account part-time work opportunities, job sharing and the possible partial solution of working from home. However, care must be taken to avoid creating the notion that employability is too narrowly limited to these avenues. Women contemplating a return to the workforce need preparation. Re-entry into the workforce after a career break may necessitate some polishing of skills and re assessment of the labour market. According to "Employer attitudes" employers believe such women need to:

- hone their work skills, and in particular, take computer courses
- learn to prepare resumes and brush up interview skills
- research the position, industry and current workplace practices
- learn to market themselves to employers
- attend assertiveness training and confidence building courses which

involve role playing

- take leave options rather than resign, for those employed in the public sector
- seek employment with more progressive companies professing family friendly policies

- attend to their personal grooming
- make sure their child care support systems are in place
- be certain of the type of work they want and take the plunge, just go for it, jump in.

Organisations such as IFUW can help women who have left the workforce to raise a family to return to the work force. They can:

- Provide courses, seminars and workshops to enable them to maintain and update their skills.

- Encourage networking so that they maintain contact with colleagues and employers
- Involve them in some form of voluntary (or if possible paid) work on an occasional, project or part-time basis in order to be perceived as maintaining work-related discipline, communication skills, and familiarity with contemporary workplace ethics and practices.

Mentoring

The informal networking that women are good at because of their interest in personal contacts can help women counteract the stress that arises due to inflexible office rules, boundaries and procedures (Fisher 1999, 29 and 330). In the same way mentoring can be a source of empowerment for women. Traditionally this form of support has been informal. Gardiner reports the results of a more formal assigned monitoring scheme for early career women researchers at Flinders University (Gardiner 1999). This pilot study was undertaken to increase women's access to research knowledge and informal power structures - particularly those that consist of senior, successful researchers. The ultimate aim of the scheme was to expand women's successful research activities and increase the number of women in middle and senior academic positions at Flinders University. (Gardiner 1999) Those mentored clearly benefited from mentoring. They showed "a decrease in worries and concerns about research, an increase in confidence of their capacity as academics, and an increase in job satisfaction." They also "performed well in relation to promotion, grant applications and success in securing grant funding" (Gardiner 1999).

Lifelong Learning

The IFUW Study and Action Programme states "Life-long learning is increasingly seen as an important element in maintaining today's society. The IFUW mission is to advocate for the improvement of the status of women and girls, to promote lifelong education, and enable graduate women to use their expertise to effect change. To enable us to carry out this mission successfully, additional education will help us to connect more fully to the new global society" (1998, 4). Article 1 (b) of the *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action* (1998) lists six points of which the second reads thus:

We affirm that the core missions and values of higher education, in particular the mission to contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of society as a whole, should be further expanded, namely, to:

...

(b) provide opportunities for higher learning and for learning throughout life, giving to learners an optimal range of choice and a flexibility of entry and exit points within the system, as well as an opportunity for individual development and social mobility in order to educate for citizenship and for active participation in society ... (1999, 21) Lifelong education and professional re-training are worldwide necessities, but do women take advantage of the opportunities available? The labour market involvement of women must be understood against the back ground for many of them in a dual role as homemaker and carer, and paid

worker. For these women lifelong education is a weapon against *de-skilling*. For women who take breaks in a career, the majority of women's first and second breaks are related to childcare and pregnancy. In one study many women reported not having barriers to their career development, but a quarter of respondents said that care of their children was a barrier for them (Rimmer & Rimmer 1994). Where it was a barrier it was the cost and the lack of local childcare which mattered. The main significance of a return to work after a first break is that this is when a downward skill shift is most likely to emerge. Intervention to prevent the skill slide from occurring would be most appropriate during the first break for those women who intend to return to paid work. Women recognise that the sources of their career difficulties are largely due to marriage, childcare, discrimination and their education. There, marriage is the barrier claimed by over half the women who had moved down the skill index (Rimmer & Rimmer 1994). The decision to care for their own children appears to be associated with poor prospects of retaining, let alone improving, skill use. The deskilling which is common for many working women in Australia has two kinds of costs. One is to the economy in failing to fully use the skill potential of the work force. The other is to the individual in the failure to receive a proper return on past investment in acquiring skills. The evidence favours subsidising women's further education during working life, especially after the first break.

Making the most of women's power base

Fisher explores the differences between how women and men see power as reflecting women's interest in personal contacts, their drive to achieve interpersonal harmony, and their tendency to work and play in egalitarian teams versus men's sensitivity to social dominance and their need to achieve rank in real or perceived hierarchies. Men associate power with rank and status. Women more often see power as a network of vital human connections. (1999, 29) Both are ambitious, but in different ways. One difference is in the way in which the sexes lead. Fewer women seek positions at the highest levels of government. Women have a growing role and most access to power and leadership in the growth of non governmental, nonprofit organisations, that is in civil society. (Fisher 1999, 140) Such civil associations with broad focus and long-term social goals are generally composed of like-minded people who come together for a common cause. Members are volunteers, and participants work in relatively egalitarian teams or 'flat packs' Women enjoy making lateral connections to others and working in less formal, less hierarchical settings. (Fisher 1999, 144) Because of increasingly strong local and international women's organisations Fisher believes that women are becoming a political force (1999, 149-50). Women's leadership in civil society will continue to expand, for two reasons. First, women are becoming better and better educated - they now exist all over the world in such growing numbers that they amount to a new critical mass, capable of making radical change. Second women are long-lived. By 2015, 20% of world's population will be over 65 - and women in this politically and socially potent age group will outnumber men 2 to 1. (1999, 151) Women who are aware of the empowerment that such organizational connections can bring by way

of net working, mentoring and marketing an image, will benefit in the labour market of the 21st century.

Conclusion

A changing labour market due to changing life styles, globalisation and to women's increasing participation in paid work is likely to affect women significantly in the coming decades. For women graduates the effects will also be due to having to respond to the outcomes now expected in higher education. Women have many advantages in the new scenario due to their special skills. Resistance to change by organisations and industries is constricting opportunities for women, and contributing to stress levels. As indicated some solutions include

- Awareness raising. Women graduates need to think about and discuss the changing global conditions. IFUW has the potential to play an important role in this process.
- Active support by NGOs
- Networking and mentoring
- Retraining opportunities through Lifelong Education used to prevent deskilling, and a way of taking account of changing labour requirements.
- Marketing women's skills. Women need to market the skills they can bring to the graduate labour market. IFUW can campaign to assert women's qualities.

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