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and Achievements of a Research
Mentoring Platform for Academic
Women

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LAUNCHING RESEARCH: EXPERIENCES WITH AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF A RESEARCH MENTORING PLATFORM FOR ACADEMIC WOMEN

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Abstract

Due to the continuing under-representation of women in academic positions of higher rank, the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Wollongong tested a mentoring platform for female researchers. This article reviews the first eight months of the platform’s lifetime and analyses experiences, achievements and failures in both a qualitative and quantitative manner. The quantitative analysis is based on a benchmark survey at the first research platform meeting and a second follow-up survey after the eight-month test period.

The majority of female researchers participating in the Women in Commerce Research Platform (WICRP) were already interested in the research component of their job and had some research output. The platform failed to attract those women who are under pressure to produce research output but struggle to make their first steps into this direction. The results demonstrated that women face specific challenges in academia, in particular being confronted with assumptions/stereotypes, having to balance children and work and the lack senior female mentors. The evaluations of the research conditions in the workplace generally did not differ between senior and junior female researchers, although the more experienced female researchers felt that they had no female role models and that they had more access to inter-faculty collaborations across the university. The follow up survey identified time, gender, network and mentoring and support issues as specific issues for female academics.

These results are put in the context of prior work investigating the challenges female academics face and recommendations are made for other institutions who might be interested to establish a mentoring platform for female researchers.

Key Words: Women Researchers, Empirical Study, Academic Challenges

INTRODUCTION

The under-representation of women in academic positions in higher education has been a challenge for both researchers and administrators. The reasons posited for this gender inequity are complex and the results ambiguous, however two distinct frameworks for explaining the under representation of senior academic women have emerged (Probert, 2005). The most common focus of study has been unequal treatment in terms of such factors as workloads, promotion progression and mentoring. The other strand deals with gendered choices, especially parenting and career. Notwithstanding, the research has demonstrated a clear link between research output and academic progression.

At the University of Wollongong a mentoring and collaborative network, the Women in Commerce Research Platform (WICRP), was initiated by senior female academics in the Faculty of Commerce and the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Unit with the express aim of assisting female academics to increase their research output. The WICRP was initially funded for a trial period between October 2004 and June 2005, and the following paper specifically reviews the first eight months of the platform’s lifetime, putting the experiences and findings from the WICRP in the context of prior work related to the specific challenges female academics face. Surveys were conducted at the beginning and end of the trial period and analyses experiences, achievements and failures in both a quantitative and qualitative manner.

PRIOR RESEARCH

In Australia as elsewhere, despite equal employment opportunity legislation and policies (for example, Affirmative Action [Equal Employment Opportunity for Women] Act, 1986), women in academia, are still underrepresented. As Table 1 shows, Australian universities broadly reflect the patterns of their US and the UK counterparts of lower representation of women in the higher academic ranks (Burton, 1997).

Table 1: 2004 FTE for Full-Time and Fractional Full-Time Academic Staff in Australia by Gender and Classification.

Above Senior Lecturer		Senior Lecturer (Level C)		Lecturer (Level B)		Below Lecturer (Level A)		Total	
Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
6 006	1 534	5 418	2 851	5 928	5 171	2 951	3 183	20 304	12 739
80%	20%	66%	34%	53%	47%	48%	52%	61%	39%

Source: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004.

Aggregated statistical data of this kind cannot indicate the extent to which this situation reflects discrimination against women or whether, for example, it reflects differences in women’s employment preferences, or factors which make them less qualified than men to advance to higher levels. However, it is known that research productivity is an important factor in career advancement in academia, and promises to become even more so as institutions worldwide place greater emphasis on research output in response to government pressures. More and more universities are embarking on explicit research monitoring processes which will be used to differentiate academic performance in applications for promotion (e.g. see Perry, 2005). At the level of both national and institutional comparisons, various studies have found that male academics demonstrate higher levels of research output than women (e.g. Long, 1990, 1992; Cole & Zuckerman, 1984; McDowell & Smith, 1992; Dwyer, 1994; Creamer, 1998; Toutkoushian, 1998). On the other hand, there are some studies that have found contrary findings, (e.g. Davis & Astin, 1987; Omundson & Mann, 1994). For example, the issue of performance indicators as a measurement of research output has implications for female staff and may explain the differences in output as more of a measurement issue (Deane et al, 1996).

The literature has identified a number of potential barriers to academic women in advancing their research careers as effectively as their male colleagues. For example, studies of faculty

workload such as those by Astin et al. (1991), Russell (1991) and the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (1994) have found that academics in the U.S. spend in excess of 50 hours a week on job-related work, and that women spend more time on teaching than do men. These differences may be due to women’s greater representation in teaching-based institutions, which may offer less opportunity for research. Also, when women did enter the higher levels in academia their minority status often resulted in being appointed to several committees, alienating them from their research (Deane et al, 1996). There are also difficulties in drawing firm conclusions which arise from the fact that time-use studies are typically based on self-report data. As Toutkoushian (1999) points out, women may be less inclined to report informal meetings as being job-related work, and may also not report time spent on academic work during vacation periods. Men and women define job-related activities differently, making these findings unreliable. Yunker (1984) also points out that there has been little research on the factors behind how academics choose to allocate their work time. So, just as with the differential patterns surrounding women’s representation in the academic ranks, it is difficult to know whether differences in time allocation are due to women preferring to spend more time on teaching, or whether institutions assign heavier teaching loads to women than to men (Toutkoushian, 1999, p 694; Deane et al, 1996). Studies of research citations, however, suggest that women’s research, while of lower quantity, is not of lower quality, and articles by women are just as likely to be cited as those by men (Long, 1992).

The editorial of a forthcoming special edition of *Women’s Studies International Forum* on women in higher education (Cotterill & Letherby, 2005), points out the need to address the reticence and ambivalence which has traditionally contributed to women’s reluctance to apply for senior positions. This same lack of confidence may also affect women’s performance in research, both in terms of carrying out research and getting it published. In the workplace in general, strategies to help women advance their careers have included mentoring by senior colleagues, creating opportunities for collaborative work, and networking.

THE WOMEN IN COMMERCE RESEARCH PLATFORM (WICRP)

WICRP was formed following recognition of the low representation of academic women in the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Wollongong, particularly at senior levels. It was established as a joint initiative of the EEO Unit and the Faculty of Commerce with the prime objective of improving research productivity and quality. More specifically, this was to be facilitated by providing a research platform based on supporting each other through the sharing of ideas, experiences, information, and to assist in identifying research directions and potential areas for collaboration.

Initially, support for the concept was gained from the senior women already present within the Faculty who unanimously agreed on the need to provide support and mentoring to the more junior women in the Faculty.

It was agreed that an eight month trial of the platform would be conducted between October 2004 and June 2005. Meetings were held every two months for two hours with lunch provided. Meetings were structured to include three components. Firstly, an update of research and EEO news was provided by members of the University and Faculty Research Committees who were WICRP participants and the director of the EEO Unit. Secondly, one or two of the women participants presented an individual profile outlining one of their current

projects, their research interests and prior work, the potential for collaboration both within the Faculty and with industry, and personal areas of success where they could offer support to other women in the Faculty. Thirdly, approximately 25 minutes were allocated for discussion of ideas to develop the research project/s or paper/s, to give recommendations regarding publication outlets and appropriate grant schemes, and to brainstorm potential collaboration partners.

In the first and the last meeting of the WICRP trial a short survey was conducted with the women in attendance. The aim of the first survey conducted in October 2004 was to establish the type of support they were seeking from a mentoring platform, which problems they face, what prevents them from undertaking research and how they evaluate the supportiveness of the University and Faculty environment. The aim of the second wave of the survey conducted in June 2005 was to determine if any changes had occurred in the evaluations over the test period and to provide an opportunity for the women to give feedback about their experiences with the WICRP. In total, 26 useable questionnaires were completed. Of these, 17 responses were from the first wave, the ‘benchmark survey’; and nine resulted from the second wave, the ‘follow-up survey’. Of the nine respondents to the follow-up survey eight have completed both. While this sounds like a very small sample size, it actually covers a significant proportion of the 32 female academic staff within the Faculty of Commerce.

The questionnaires that were specifically developed for these purposes were two and three pages long respectively, and contained both open ended and closed questions for which answer options were provided. The results of the closed questions are discussed in the section ‘Quantitative Results’ below. The responses to those questions are discussed in the section ‘Qualitative Results’ follow, concluding with an evaluation and recommendations.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The results are reported by providing separate percentages for the benchmark and the follow-up survey as well as by comparing whether any differences between these two measurements can be detected. For the comparison, only respondents who have completed their surveys in both waves are included.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE OF THE PARTICIPATING FEMALE RESEARCHERS

Respondents were asked how long they have been working in the Faculty, how they perceived their position as a researcher and whether or not they had published in journals and conferences and whether they had been successful in the past in attracting research grants. The results are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Experience of Participating Female Researchers

Question	Answer Options	%
Perceived Position	Relatively junior	59
	Relatively senior	41
Worked in the Faculty of Commerce	0-2 years	41
	3-5 years	24
	6 or more years	35
Research Experience	Attended an academic conference	94
	Published in proceedings	76
	Published in a journal	65
	Gained internal funding	53
	Gained external funding	29

As can be seen, two thirds of the women who participated in WICRP perceive themselves as relatively junior. This is encouraging given that the platform was aimed at mentoring younger, less experienced researchers. On the other hand, the proportion of senior women is higher than expected. The reason lies in the fact that senior female researchers established the network and were consequently involved in it.

With respect to the experience regarding publishing and success in winning grants, it can be seen from Table 2 that almost all participants have attended a research conference. Only three quarters have published in refereed proceedings and 60 percent in journals. Half of the participants have been successful in applying for internal grants, and one third in external grants. The results to this question are very interesting as they clearly demonstrate the hierarchy of results that can be used to mentor a young researcher: starting with a conference attendance, leading them further to a conference publication and finally training them to submit manuscripts to journals.

Comparative analysis of these results was not undertaken as it cannot reasonably be expected that half a year of mentoring through WICRP would have significantly impacted the publication or grant track records.

MAIN AREAS OF INTEREST

Participants were asked to state which aspects of their academic jobs they enjoyed most. While there was a strong assumption that research-interested female academics would be attracted by the WICRP, mentoring is particularly important for academics who might not enjoy the research component so much presently because they have not had a lot of experience with it. Table 3 gives the percentages of respondents’ answers. The higher the value the higher the extent to which respondents agreed with each of the statements.

Table 3: Aspects of Academic Position Most Enjoyed

	%
Research	88
Industry	6
Governance / management	6

As can be seen, the vast majority of women participating in the research platform are most interested in research. This finding is in line with the high percentage of self-perception to be

a senior researcher. From the perspective of an effective mentoring framework, this is somewhat regrettable as the female staff members less interested in research but under equally strong institutional pressure to deliver research outcomes do not appear to be taking the opportunity to improve their research skills and obtain research-related information and network with other researchers.

EVALUATION OF WORKING ENVIRONMENT

For this comparison only responses to the follow-up survey are included for those women who stated that they have also completed the benchmark survey. The average evaluations on a metric scale (respondents were asked to make a cross on a horizontal line at the point that best represented their evaluation) are provided in Table 4.

Table 4: Evaluation of Working Environment

	Benchmark survey	Follow-up survey
Have the tools needed to conduct research	5.4	5.4
Enjoy the research culture within the Faculty	4.3	5.2
Enjoy the research culture within the University	5.6	6.2
Network of people in the Faculty	6.0	6.0
Network of people in the University	4.0	6.0
Opportunities to learn about research in the Faculty	4.8	6.2
Opportunities to learn about research in the University	5.3	5.8
Opportunities for collaboration in the Faculty	5.1	7.2
Opportunities for collaboration in the University	4.0	6.2
Opportunities to gain feedback in the Faculty	5.0	6.9
Opportunities to gain feedback in the University	4.0	5.8
Get advice regarding funding in the Faculty	6.7	8.4
Get advice regarding funding in the University	5.9	8.4
Advice regarding collaboration in the Faculty	4.0	5.7
Advice regarding collaboration in the University	3.7	5.2
Faculty supports my research	4.4	6.0
University supports my research	4.8	6.3
Male role models in the Faculty	6.2	5.3
Female role models in the Faculty	6.8	7.5

As can be seen the evaluations are generally low, particularly for ‘networking at university level,’ ‘opportunities for collaboration at university level’, ‘opportunity to gain feedback at university level’ and ‘advice regarding collaboration in the university’ present challenges. Having male and female role models is rated highest. A systematic tendency of higher ratings in the follow-up survey (marked in bold in Table 4) can be detected². Only the evaluation of having male role models in the faculty has obtained a lower score than this was the case in the benchmark survey.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to state whether or not they thought there were structural barriers in the workplace that presented them from doing as much research as they would like to do and whether any barriers were specific to women in academia. The results are given in Table 5.

Table 5: Percent of Participants Who Perceive That There Are Structural Barriers and Specific Challenges for Women in the Workplace

	Benchmark survey	Follow-up survey
Structural barriers	75	86
Challenges as a woman	60	71

As can be seen a high proportion of women have stated both to be the case in the follow-up survey. This is a counterintuitive finding. One would expect to see the opposite effect, namely that the WICRP leads to the reduction of barriers. This result can be explained by the fact that respondents were asked about their perceptions rather than listing actual barriers.

Consequently, increased communication among female researchers is likely to have raised awareness of certain structural problems that might not have been at the top of the mind of female academics before the establishment of the WICRP.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The qualitative section of the two research surveys consisted of four questions: 1) what could be done to improve the respondent’s research performance; 2) what could be done to increase the respondent’s enjoyment of research; 3) whether the respondent felt that there were any barriers and/or structural challenges which impede the ability to conduct research; and 4) whether the respondent faced any particular challenges as a woman working within the Faculty of Commerce. The follow-up survey incorporated six additional questions pertaining to the WICRP in particular. Questions asked included thoughts on the WICRP, whether to continue the initiative, whether the respondents were prepared to actively contribute to the Research Platform, whether any new collaborations or publications had resulted from involvement in WICRP and general questions as to the positive and negative aspects of the WICRP.

The responses to the two research surveys indicated four broad categories of concern that were impeding on the participants’ research ability and enjoyment. These categories were:

1. time issues,
2. gender based problems,
3. lack of networking and mentoring opportunities,
4. lack of support.

TIME ISSUES

The majority of participants indicated issues with time allocation. The benchmark survey as well as the follow up survey showed that 59% and 67% of women respectively found time allocation for research and tasks that interfered with their research time as a major hindrance to research performance and enjoyment. Of particular importance was the inability to get ‘block’ time for research and also the interference of teaching and administrative tasks on with research time. To improve research performance and enjoyment respondents stated:

‘more block time rather than interspersed by so much admin and teaching’.

‘too many constant distractions. Not enough time for in depth reading and sustained periods of concentration/working’.

Although time constraints for research does not appear to be particularly gender related, a study by Probert (2005) found that women with children most often cited time constraints as a major deterrent for completing research. This is supported by other studies, which found that females in general have more responsibilities for ‘non-work’ activities than do males (Fu & Shaffer, 2001; Probert, 2005). Females often conduct research during traditional non-work time (Toutkoushian, 1999; Smith, 2000) while performing caring or other home duties. These non-work activities can greatly impede on the time that is available for research.

In regards to the benchmark survey there was some difference between junior and senior researchers as to time issues, with senior women being more affected by this particular problem. The follow up survey showed an even greater distinction of the difference between junior and senior researchers. Five out of the six senior women respondents (83%) raised time as an issue, whereas only one of the three junior respondents (33%) indicated time to be a problem. This phenomenon could be explained by an exploratory study of young professionals investigating the integration of work and non-work (Wilson et al, 2004). This study found that there was little difference in the segregation of work and non-work between males and females with the exception of the only mother in the study. This indicates the socially expected norm of the female as the primary caregiver thus necessitating a greater need to establish boundaries between work and non-work (Wilson et al., 2004). If these boundaries are minimised through initiatives such as flexible working conditions (minimal set working hours, working from home) then work and non-work segregation becomes blurred allowing for non-work to intrude on work and vice versa. Unfortunately the very nature of academic work lends itself particularly well to flexible working conditions that could partly explain the above-mentioned phenomena. Another explanation for the high level of expressed time concerns among senior female academics might be their increased level of administrative duties that they are expected to fulfil in senior positions.

GENDER ISSUES

The second biggest concern was in regards to gender issues with 53% in the benchmark survey and 56% in the follow-up survey indicating that being a woman was a particular challenge in their research career. The issues raised ranged from family obligations and choices between children and career, lack of women mentors and role models and the need to prove oneself as a woman academic, to the more general stereotyping and intimidating male domination at the workplace. Thirty five percent (35%) of those expressing gender issues were junior researchers whereas only 18% of senior respondents found gender issues a challenge or a barrier to their work within the faculty. The follow-up survey showed a similar result with 55% of respondents commenting on gender issues. However, the breakdown between junior and senior researchers showed a reverse trend with 22% of junior respondents and 33% of senior respondents stating that gender problems were of concern. One senior researcher commented to the question whether she faced particular challenges as a woman working within the faculty with,

‘yes, but no more than I would have in any workplace.’

This reflects the socially accepted norm that women will have to overcome gender related barriers in order to embark on a successful career.

NETWORKING AND MENTORING OPPORTUNITIES

The third category identified concerns with networking and mentoring or lack thereof. The benchmark survey showed 35% of respondents found networking and mentoring a challenge, whereas the follow-up survey found only 22% had problems in this area. The lower figure in the follow up survey could be due to the perceived networking and mentoring opportunities within the WICRP. Although numerous publications are available on the lack of networking and mentoring opportunities for women in the workplace (e.g. Pini et al., 2004; Simpson, 2000; Oakley, 2000) this did not appear to be a major issue for most senior respondents. With the exception of one senior researcher who wanted more opportunities to work with and assist others (particularly junior staff) only junior respondents indicated a decrease of research performance and enjoyment due to lack of mentoring and network opportunities.

LACK OF SUPPORT

The fourth issue identified was lack of support. The survey showed 29% of women indicating issues with this category in the benchmark survey and 22% in the follow-up survey. The distribution between senior and junior researchers was fairly even with the main issue being academic support for the topics of interest, closely followed by financial and administrative support. One senior respondent stated that

‘the topics in which I am interested in do not appear to have much support within the faculty’;

with a junior researcher writing that

‘research interest not valued if not ‘commercial’.

Lack of support, specifically financial support has been cited by Probert (2005) to be of more concern for men than it is for women. She found that female academics were more concerned with time issues.

THE EVALUATION OF WICRP

Overall the response to the WICRP was very positive, although two senior researchers suggested a different format. Eight out of the nine respondents indicated they were prepared to actively contribute to the WICRP either as presenters or organisers. One of the nine respondents stated that the initiative had resulted in a new collaboration with another three respondents stating that there were some possibilities for future collaborations and publications. In response to the question, ‘what was particularly good about the WICRP’, an overwhelming 89% responded with increased networking and/or mentoring opportunities. Some suggestions on improvement for the current format of the WICRP included more regular meetings, a greater number of attendees and broadening the base to include other faculties and/or research areas and interest groups. One respondent wanted fewer meetings but on a more informal basis for better networking and another respondent wanted to narrow the scope with an occasional get together of senior women. Half of the participants stated that WICRP has led to new research collaborations.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Research into the under representation of academic women at higher academic levels tends fall into two broad themes - structural inequalities and gendered choices (Probert, 2005). Inequality in the workplace includes workloads, lack of mentoring and other factors that contribute to a lack of progression. Gendered choices focus on the different levels of human capital and the type of choices that men and women make in the workplace, especially about parenting and career. The findings of this study did identify issues consistent with the extant literature including both unequal treatment and gendered choices. Time and the issue of defining work/non-work were identified as major challenges. The level of administrative workload experienced by the senior academic women was also a significant concern. Gender issues were difficult to contextualise in this study and the results were ambiguous. Networking and mentoring were perceived as important along with institutional support and structures to assist women academics. Identifying the factors surrounding under-representation of women in senior academic positions is a complex issue, however there exists a common acknowledgement of the need for mentoring, the opportunity for collaborative work and networking as a strategy. This study indicated that the WICRP did provide this opportunity, especially at the faculty level. Overwhelmingly, the participants indicated their work environment had improved with their involvement with WICRP. In particular, a positive outcome in terms of collaboration and mentoring and the dissemination of information among female academics in the Faculty of Commerce that attended WICRP. Indeed this paper has been an outcome shared equally by senior and junior academic staff and students.

WICRP has continued beyond the initial trial period after consultation with the members. The format of the meetings has altered as a response to feedback from the surveys and general discussion. Commensurate with the issue of time the meetings are now held for 1 hour every 6 weeks with lunch provided. An administrative assistant organises the agenda for the meeting and this is circulated prior to the day. The two strong themes of collaboration and dissemination of information are reinforced by the new format. Each meeting alternates between a research member’s profile and research and administrative updates. Since the experience has been beneficial, each member has been encouraged to seek fellow female academic staff to participate in WICRP.

FOOTNOTES

1. All authors have contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order.
2. Analysis of Variance results are insignificant due to the small sample size.

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