A transformational programme?

Very few things happen in an institution that could be said to transform that institution, but LDW has transformed UWA.

Alan Robson, Vice-Chancellor — UWA news 17/5/04

A noteworthy milestone

When one is engaged in a large task, where progress can be slow and hard to measure, it is particularly important to mark the milestones. Redressing longstanding and sustained disadvantage for women in universities is such a task. In 1994 the Leadership Development for Women (LDW), an affirmative action programme, was created by women and men with this vision. In 2005 it is celebrating and reflecting on the ten years of that journey, a substantial and noteworthy milestone.

The purposes of this 10th anniversary ‘milestone’ publication are many. Firstly, it celebrates success through glimpses of the stories of individual women participants. Secondly, it documents the programme — what is it, what does it do, how has it evolved, and what place does it hold in the life of the University? Thirdly, it evaluates — what works, where are the problems, and what could work better? Importantly, what is the impact of the programme on the participants and the wider University community?

Do programmes such as LDW make a difference? Are they, indeed, transformational?

The 10th anniversary provides a moment for reflection, for looking back in order to look forward.

Over its ten year life LDW has established a reputation as one of the finest in-house women’s programmes in higher education, nationally and internationally. Is this reputation justified? What makes LDW different or unique? This publication aims to strike a balance between sharing what we know and have learned over the ten years with the broader community and celebrating the achievements of the programme. The process of publishing this report is intended to discourage complacency by opening our efforts to broader scrutiny and encouraging critique. Only in this way can LDW remain dynamic and responsive to the ever-changing needs of the University of Western Australia.

Finalist in The Australian 2004 HR Awards; The NETg Award for Best Learning and Development Strategy.
The task of celebration, documentation and evaluation is presented in multiple ways. Formal documentation and evaluation processes sit alongside the voices of the participants. In these pages you will find photos and occasional archival materials. There are many stories and comments from women whose working lives have been changed in small and large ways by their participation. It is not an historical record of the programme, nor does it claim to be a definitive evaluation. It does, however, attempt to be a rich collection of stories, perspectives, data, memories, snapshots and moments in the life of the programme. The authors hope it will paint a picture of what has made LDW special over the years.

**Gender equity**

UWA takes gender equity seriously. Support from the Executive has been unwavering since 1990, the period of the most recent three Vice-Chancellors (Professors Fay Gale, Deryck Schreuder and Alan Robson). Support from the top is consistently cited in public, private enterprise and higher education research (Palermo 2004; Ramsay 2001; Singh 2005; Chesterman et al. 2004) as one of the most critical factors in successfully addressing gender equity. But it is something that we at UWA should not take for granted.

The longevity of the LDW programme should be seen in the context of an organisation with considerable gender equity maturity. A programme such as LDW cannot be successful as a stand-alone strategy in an environment where the equity agenda waxes and wanes according to organisational whim. It would soon be seen as tokenistic and cynical. Women would know their time was better spent on other career development opportunities or other work-related activities.

But why do we need a women-only programme? What was the position of women in the University prior to LDW? The story of LDW is best told in tandem with the bigger picture for women and with other equity initiatives and progress over the same time period. Indeed, the genesis of LDW is linked to the activities of the Equity and Diversity Office and it continues to be so. To elaborate this parallel history Chapter 4 provides an overview of gender equity at UWA over the same time period. The statistics in Chapter 4 also serve as a reminder of where women are and are not in the current UWA organisational structure.
Programme evaluation — a slippery slope?

How can a programme such as LDW be evaluated? This is a vexed question for which there is no simple answer. Firstly, what sort of programme is it and what are the aims? As explained in more detail in Chapter 2, LDW is a development programme with dual aims, to develop individual women and to contribute to changing the broader management and University culture. It is difficult enough to investigate any lasting impact on participants; not surprisingly, it is even harder to assess the impact of the programme on the University culture. How does one measure organisational culture change and isolate the impact of a single factor? Knowing how to tackle the broader culture change ‘mandate’ of the programme has proved more difficult and elusive over time than delivering an effective programme to a group of participants. Evaluating that culture change has proved even more elusive.

But firstly, what of the women who appear in this account? Some women completed the programme last year, others in 1994. There are no before and after tests, no matched control groups. How does one investigate programme impact? What are some of the issues to be considered? If one begins to claim any positive programme effect, the first issue to address is the ‘cream of the crop’ problem. Perhaps women who are attracted to the programme are special, more pro-active, or already have enhanced leadership potential in some way prior to participation. While this argument is difficult to prove or disprove, it can be countered by the fact that 360 participants over ten years goes beyond skimming the cream. What, too, about things that would have happened anyway? Changes occur for all of us in our working lives, perhaps just as a result of time or chance. We grow in confidence, opportunities arise. What, if anything, can actually be attributed to the programme?

What kind of changes would we be looking for? When we are talking about women’s working lives, their careers, their leadership development, what might constitute success? It will surely be different for different people, particularly for different groups of staff. For example, promotion and retention issues are very different for general¹, research² and academic staff³. Wherever possible, survey data and analysis will be provided separately for different staff groups. Even within a particular staff group, success can be difficult to gauge. While retention of academic staff could be considered a positive, and is an often cited University priority objective (to recruit develop and retain the highest quality staff), the reality is many academics gain promotion by changing their employer, and women’s reluctance to do so has been shown to work against them (Chesterman 2004).

As we work further through the layers, more and more becomes contested. The initial aim of developing women’s leadership skills and knowledge, in order to increase their participation in positions of leadership and in the University’s decision-making processes⁴ has an emphasis on formal leadership that is increasingly being called into question. Leadership as a concept is being re-defined through the work of scholars such as Sinclair (1998) and Eveline (2004). In this evaluation what kind of leadership are we referring to when we use the term ‘leadership’? The programme may be effectively preparing women for a ‘post heroic’ leadership that is not labelled or perceived as leadership by the participants themselves or others.

The previous evaluation of the LDW programme, conducted in 1998 (de Vries 1998) seems, in retrospect, to have occurred when these things seemed more clear and simple. Most participants had only recently completed the programme, contested meanings of leadership were on the more distant horizon, and the focus on culture change was less prominent. At that time, the analysis of promotion and retention data using a control group approach, where LDW participants were compared with women who had not participated in LDW and with men, was ground
breaking. With the benefit of hindsight, with the added complexities of longer time elapsed, and with fewer women in the control group, these statistical approaches are no longer adequate. In addition, initial attempts to provide a control group did not take account of differences in levels. Claims regarding promotion and retention rates attributed to the programme may have been enthusiastic and optimistic, given these limitations. In addition, the ‘cream of the crop’ issue, regarding pre-existing differences between the women who participated and those who did not, was not addressed.

Secondly, there is the issue of evaluating culture change. While this is a complex issue largely beyond the scope of this publication, it has been in part addressed by Eveline (2004) (see Chapter 3 for further details). It is an aspect of the programme that has repeatedly been commented on by both participants and mentors, and their stories and comments reflect their views.

Evaluating a programme such as LDW is not a straightforward task. It has been easier to identify problems with the previous approach than to forge a new methodology that does greater justice to the questions we would like answered. There are no easy answers offered in this publication, just honest attempts to hold these issues in creative tension, and to draw on a multiplicity of approaches, none of them perfect in conveying the LDW programme to you.

Gaining perspective — toeholds on the slippery slope

Given the difficulties of programme evaluation, it has been important to look for ways of ‘grounding’ this review of LDW and its impact within a broader context, while remaining true to the original purpose of the programme. This has been done in two main ways. Firstly, there is a large and growing body of literature investigating and addressing gender issues and inequalities in the workplace. This relates to women in the workplace more broadly, but includes a significant focus on women in higher education. Unfortunately the literature has an emphasis on academic women, with relative neglect of general staff women. Most chapters begin with a brief synopsis of what is known from the literature regarding the issues being considered, so that the current programme approach can be judged against the latest understandings. Additionally, LDW can be benchmarked against the small body of literature evaluating women’s development programmes. Secondly, the evaluation measures the programme against the original programme objectives. This has the advantage of putting the original programme objectives under scrutiny, examining their long term relevance and providing a marker against which changes in thinking and approach can be judged. It also allows for the more modest question — ‘does the programme meet its original objectives?’ — to be addressed.

Previous documentation of LDW

LDW is a programme accustomed to scrutiny. There were three evaluation reports published early in the life of the programme. They are:

- An Interim Report on the 1994 LDW Programme
- Evaluation of the Leadership Development for Women Programme 1996, and

This last report, plus a conference paper entitled: Creating Opportunities: The Difference a Women’s Leadership Programme Can Make (de Vries 2002), and Promotion and Retention Rates for the Leadership Development for Women Programme, 1994 to 2003 are all available and downloadable from the LDW website http://www.osds.uwa.edu.au/ldw

Creating Opportunities, despite some of the limitations in regard to promotion and retention noted above, created a benchmark in using both a qualitative and quantitative approach to programme evaluation. Participants self-reported numerous significant changes in their working lives, which
they attribute to programme involvement, including greater participation in networks, increased visibility, becoming mentors to other staff, participation in special projects, taking on secondments and increased committee involvement.

The report concluded that LDW participants enjoyed greater success and increased their contribution to the University community.

The LDW programme is highlighted in a recent ethnography of UWA, *Ivory Basement Leadership* (Eveline 2004). Chapter 5, ‘Inside Agitators?’, outlines the foundation in Australia of women-only programmes, and the history of their development in WA, before going on to provide a detailed account of LDW. The kind of account provided by Eveline goes well beyond the scope of this publication and will not be replicated here. It is, however, an excellent complementary source of information regarding the programme.

**Sources of material**

There are multiple sources of material for this publication, which will be further detailed in the appropriate chapters. In brief they are:

- A survey of previous participants, exploring their views about effectiveness and impact of the programme for them, with a separate section on mentoring
- Human Resources extract data
- Interviews with mentors
- Interviews and focus groups with participants identified as belonging to minority groups
- Interviews with women who did not complete the programme, and
- Interviews with LDW participants.

Quotes are used with permission and taken from post programme follow-up lunches, LDW anniversary reunion lunches, interviews and focus groups, and unsolicited emails sent to LDW staff.

**The publication in overview**

Chapter 2 *Meeting the challenge* outlines the nuts and bolts of the programme. It begins with the original vision and programme foundations, looks at how LDW has evolved over time, and focuses on what the programme is now. It examines the profile of programme participants over its ten year history and introduces the survey and survey respondents. Survey respondents’ views on reasons for programme participation, the components of the programme and their impact on leadership development are presented.

Chapter 3 *Gendered organisation: from theory to action* provides the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings to the programme. It explores gender, the concept of the gendered workplace, leadership and organisational culture and their application in the programme content and design. This approach and the profile of the LDW programme is put into the broader national and international context. The chapter expands on particular programme components, complemented by data from the survey.

Chapter 4 *Essential ingredients: ‘critical acts’, ‘critical mass’* provides a broad brush look at gender equity from about 1990, outlining the challenges, the progress and future priorities facing UWA. This parallel story highlights the synergies of multiple approaches to gender equity and acknowledges the context within which the programme is operating.

Chapter 5 *Creating opportunities* builds on the title of the 1998 publication by focusing on changes in women’s working lives. The chapter explores the impact of LDW, using broad definitions of career and
leadership, and acknowledges different career opportunities, paths and choices for different staff groups.

Chapter 6 How am I a minority? examines the applicability and effectiveness of the programme for women from minority groups. This chapter uses the voices of these women to explore their experiences of the programme. It asks the question, ‘how can we maintain an inclusive group that moves beyond our experiences of gender, in order to embrace diversity?’

Chapter 7 Sharing the journey looks at mentoring in greater detail. Mentoring is the aspect of the programme that most involves the broader University community and mentors’ voices are included here, alongside survey material specific to mentoring.

Chapter 8 Critical to cultural change takes stock of progress to date and looks to the future of LDW and gender equity at UWA. It deals with issues such as ‘what about the men?’ and looks at the overall impact of LDW. Is it more than the sum of its parts?

Footnotes
1 General staff is used, for lack of a better term, as an all encompassing term for technical, professional, administrative, management and research staff employed under the General Staff Agreement.
2 Where research staff data is available, it refers to academic research staff only.
3 Academic staff refers to academic teaching and research staff, and academic research staff unless stated otherwise.
4 First point in LDW mission statement.
5 The survey was designed, conducted and reported on by the Institutional Research Unit.
6 Provided by the IRU.
7 Conducted by Marie Finlay with direction from Jennifer de Vries and Claire Webb.
8 As above
9 As above
10 Conducted by Lindy Brophy, UWA journalist and Victoria Zakourkina, Arts practicum student. Undertaken with support from a Diversity Initiatives Fund grant.