While the LDW programme has played a pivotal role in the University’s journey towards gender equity, its story needs to be placed in the larger context of organisational change within the University. In the early 1990s the University became serious about creating a workplace where women would want to work and where their contribution could be fully realised. Commentators suggest that such journeys are as much about the ‘critical acts’ taken by an organisation to achieve gender equality as they are about recruiting and developing a ‘critical mass’ of female staff in key positions and in all aspects of the organisation’s activities (Dahlerup 1988; Chesterman 2004).

For the University of Western Australia the ‘critical acts’ have focused on three major areas. Firstly, the University had to identify and dismantle the structural barriers and subtleties of bias that served to either limit women’s participation or to undervalue or ignore their contribution. Secondly, the University needed to address the issue of its workplace culture and the degree to which it was ‘masculine’ in orientation, that is, reflecting male values and preferred ways of working. Finally, structures that supported women’s traditional dual roles of worker and primary carer of family responsibilities, as part of an opportunity for all staff to achieve ‘life balance’, were required.

Making up ground

In 1990, the year when Professor Fay Gale commenced her term as the University’s first female Vice-Chancellor (and only the second woman to hold such a position in Australia), she is reported to have asked ‘where are the women?’ While women comprised 55% of general staff they formed only 22% of all academic staff. By comparison, women comprised 48% of the student body. Women were not only under-represented on academic staff, but were notably compressed into the lower classification levels of both the academic and general staffing streams. Women were also significantly less likely than their male colleagues to have an ongoing appointment or even a contract of longer than one year.

Those women may well have responded with scepticism and disbelief if they had been told that within 12 years the University would be ranked among the top 3% of organisations in Australia demonstrating a genuine, sustained and effective commitment to improving the position and opportunities of their women employees. Since 2002 the University of Western Australia has been awarded the annual citation Employer of Choice for Women by the federal organisation EOWA (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency).

When Professor Gale became Vice-Chancellor the University had one of
the lowest proportions of women on the academic staff in the nation’s university system. This had arisen through a combination of factors. Historically the University had offered traditionally male-dominated disciplines such as medicine, agriculture and engineering and, unlike many other universities, had not engaged in mergers with institutions comprising the then predominantly female-dominated disciplines such as teaching and nursing.

There were also systemic barriers within the University that contributed to the invisibility of female staff. The combined roles of women as workers and caregivers, for example, were not easily adapted to the traditional ways of gaining academic recognition such as a singular focus on research. For women on the general staff, the task of balancing work and family obligations was made more difficult by limited flexibility in working arrangements and no provision for paid maternity leave (until 1994).

Overall UWA was marked by a workplace culture with clear expectations that young men appointed to junior positions would develop a career; there were no similar expectations of young women (Crawford & Tonkinson 1988).

A quick demographic snapshot of the staffing profile in 1990 illustrates the position of women:

- 81% of female general staff were employed at salary levels 1 and 2, compared to 45% of their male colleagues
- Female general staff were found in narrow and traditional employment classifications. Women accounted for 88% of clerks, but only 12% of tradespeople (eight out of 68) and 13% of managers (nine out of 68)
- Only two of 13 employees at HEW level 8 or above were female, and
- Only 34% of female general staff were in ongoing employment compared to 54% of their male colleagues; 45% of female general staff were employed on a contract of one year or less, compared to only 18% of their male colleagues.

In the academic stream, the picture for female employees was even bleaker:

- There were two female professors out of a total of 74 (2.7%)
- Only 16% of female academics were tenured compared to 59% of their male colleagues
- A staggering 64% of female academics were employed on contracts of one year or less, compared to 24% of male academics, and
- Only at tutor level, the lowest academic rank and one that, at that time, had very limited or non existent career prospects, were women more numerous than their male counterparts.

Thus the University was starting from an extremely low base when it began to introduce strategies aimed at ensuring high calibre female academic and general staff were attracted, retained and promoted in numbers that more appropriately reflected their representation in the student body, workforce and community generally.

Reaping the benefits

Fifteen years later the University’s staff profile has changed dramatically. In 2002, for the first time, women achieved equitable representation (50.5%) on the overall University staff, with that representation increasing to 51.5% by the 2004 staff census. Women now comprise 35% of the academic staff and are over-represented on the general staff (63%).
As women’s representation in the workforce has increased so, too, has their visibility and positioning. With that increased visibility has come a number of significant ‘firsts’ in the staffing profile, particularly in the senior management team.

In 2004 the University appointed its first female Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Margaret Seares, and its first female Executive Director, Finance and Resources, Ms Gaye McMath. The executive was also expanded to include the appointment of a Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) with Professor Belinda Probert as the first incumbent. These appointments have resulted in the first gender balanced Executive in the University’s history. The University’s governing body, the Senate, has also seen an increasing number of women in recent years bringing it close to gender balance. In 2005, for the first time, four of the nine Faculty Deans are women. The two remaining Dean positions (Graduate Research School and Undergraduate Studies) are now also held by women.

Women now comprise 63% of the general staff and are in the majority at most classification levels with the exception of levels 2, 7 and 10. Women also hold 59% of the School Manager positions.

**Dismantling structural barriers**

**Promotion and tenure for academic women**

The traditional barriers to women’s participation and success within the University could be found within the way that staff were recruited and promoted. The promotion process for academic staff, for example, contained a number of seemingly gender neutral structural barriers that, in fact, impacted negatively on the career aspirations of female academics. The primary focus on research output, for example, failed to acknowledge those aspects of the academic role, teaching and service, where women were perceived to do well. Moreover, research productivity was a particularly male domain, requiring the space to think, the time to network and the opportunity to gain visibility and international networks through travel and conference participation. This set of favourable conditions was more likely to occur for an academic whose partner had prime responsibility for their children. The promotion criteria were expanded, therefore, to focus on the quality of teaching, and research and service. Factors such as years of service and the emphasis on the volume of publications (in contrast to the impact and location of such publications) were removed from the Promotions and Tenure Committee’s considerations (Eveline 2004).

The University’s revised promotions procedures are now well regarded in Australia. While some significant structural changes occurred in the late 1980s (such as the removal of the 15 year rule which allowed for ‘automatic’ promotion to Senior Lecturer), changes in the 1990s were largely around a more generous interpretation of the promotion criteria.
Key features of the revised system and criteria as summarised by Eveline (2004), and Todd and Bird (2000).

- The criteria for promotion were broadened to also include an emphasis on ‘the ability to promote a supportive collegiate environment’
- While applicants who worked part-time, or whose careers had been hindered, broken or delayed for family reasons, were expected to produce the same calibre of research, their absence from the workplace was taken into account in the assessment of the Promotions and Tenure Committee
- The promotion process was extended to include promotion to professor with no quotas at any level, so that each applicant was considered on their merit
- The Promotions and Tenure Committee met monthly rather than twice a year
- The gender balance of the Promotions and Tenure Committee has improved, and care is taken to achieve an arts/science balance on the Committee
- The Chair of the Promotions and Tenure Committee directly encourages women to apply, including making a presentation on promotion at the Leadership Development for Women programme, and
- Staff can seek feedback on their application from the Chair of the Committee and the Vice-Chancellorship both during and after the process of applying. This not only provides encouragement and expert advice, but also sends the important message that promotion applications, particularly from women, are supported.

Changes made to the UWA academic promotion system have been critical in removing previous inequities. This is reflected in the promotion application success rates; while they have increased for both men and women, the improvement has been greater for women.

Opportunities for general staff women

The commitment by members of the Executive in the early 1990s to gender equity and improved human resource management, in general, led to the removal of obvious barriers to women’s participation. It also saw the introduction of innovative strategies such as a salary progression scheme. Unlike academic staff, members of the general staff can not be automatically promoted on the basis of their merit and achievements, but must compete successfully for a higher level position. Many excellent and talented employees looked outside the University due to a lack of promotion opportunities. The salary progression scheme provides a means to reward general staff who have demonstrated

Loretta Baldassar laughs now when she recalls the big discovery she made through the Leadership Development for Women programme

“It dawned on me that I didn’t have to work on the weekends. It sounds ridiculous, but I had always felt I had to, and what I learnt through LDW made me see that I didn’t have to, and I have tried hard not to work on the weekends since then.”

Loretta came to UWA from ECU in 1995 but, although she was interested, she couldn’t find time to do the LDW programme until 2001, soon after her first son, Xavier, was born.

“By then, I had a store of lectures I could draw on and I could take the time to do LDW without feeling under stress.”

She had been working on an international research deal with the Cassamarca Foundation, headed by an Italian philanthropist, which involved millions of dollars and many academics throughout Australia. The contract was signed the day before Xavier was born and Loretta became Chair of the foundation in Australia.

“So I had already been thrust into a leadership role through Cassamarca, the most junior of all the academics involved. I needed some help with that, and I also needed some guidance with my work-life balance.

“I knew that, sooner or later, I would have to take on some head of department

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excellent performance by facilitating their progress to the next classification and salary level.

Women in the lower classifications have been the major beneficiaries. As has been the case with many of the structural changes the University instituted, the ‘bar’ has been lifted for all; the salary progression scheme has also been successfully accessed by men on the general staff.

**Recruitment and selection**

The University also re-examined the way it recruited its staff, recognising that the reliance on networks, predominantly male, would only serve to attract and value ‘more of the same’. Selection panels were required to have gender balance, and there was a requirement that panel members, most particularly the Chair, would have undergone recent selection training that included a discussion on the concept of ‘merit’ as a social construct rather than an immutable instrument with which the ‘best’ applicant would invariably be selected.

In the early 1990s the University also instituted a review of staff who had been employed for long periods on short term contracts (in one case for thirteen years). As a consequence a number of the senior female tutors who had been on a series of one-year contracts were converted to Lecturers and offered tenure. Funding was also provided by the Vice-Chancellor to support ‘affirmative action’ appointments of meritorious women into areas where there was little or no female representation in the workforce. This occasional practice continues and provides the means by which women’s contributions can be extended to discipline areas where there are few or no women staff but a substantial presence within the student body.

Nevertheless, when women are appointed to areas where there have been few women in the past, it is helpful to have an examination of the workplace culture into which they are being placed. If the culture is unsupportive, if it does not allow for career development, an equitable opportunity to accrue merit, or the opportunity to balance work and family/life commitments, then women will leave or, at best, not flourish. So the recruitment and promotion of women can not be seen in isolation from mentoring, support, career development and the workplace climate. The University’s achievements in addressing these areas, most particularly through the ongoing commitment to the LDW programme, have contributed to its reputation as an organisation committed to gender equity.

**Creating a campus culture of inclusivity and respect**

The early years of the 1990s were not easy times for women on campus. The early affirmative action appointments and changes to the promotion system caused consternation in some quarters. There were suggestions that merit was being compromised and that, similar to other workplaces where such proactive steps were being taken, women heard that they had only got the job/promotion because ‘they were a woman’.

Some women staff at this time would have experienced an unfriendly, even hostile, workplace climate. Indeed women in some areas of the workforce reported that the culture was not just unsupportive but also sexist and, sometimes, a place where sexual harassment occurred. In 1994 Advisers were trained specifically to provide advice and support on sexual harassment to staff and students, predominantly women.

**Auditing change**

While some progress was made in the first half of the 1990s, change was slow. In recognition that cultural change in an organisation takes time, and may provoke resistance, the University through the Senate initiated a
review or ‘audit’ of gender equity for women staff (Stuart 1999). A review of academic women was conducted in 1995, followed by a review of women on general staff in 1997.

The recommendations were often hotly debated across the campus, particularly in the case of the review of academic women staff. While there was no consensus, the process encouraged further change. A number of new, often innovative, strategies to support gender equity were identified and introduced. Many were beneficial for men as well as women.

Mainstreaming change

The reviews served the purpose of placing gender equity firmly and very publicly on the agenda. ‘Equity’ became incorporated into the University’s strategic planning process at all levels and into the performance requirements of senior academic staff to be measured and evaluated.

A greater level of accountability for the achievement of gender equity at the faculty and organisation unit level was expected. Faculty Deans began to set aspirational targets for the representation of women within their areas, especially in those areas of the University where there were few or no women. These targets and other equity considerations became matters for discussion between the Deans and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in their annual performance reviews. The underlying assumption was that discussion and consultation are crucial to culture change; unless men in senior positions are involved and supportive then change will not occur.

By ‘mainstreaming’ equity, responsibility for cultural and systemic change was shared across the institution, to be addressed in ways that were appropriate at the local level. Equity also became a centrepiece in collective bargaining negotiations and has led to important gains for staff with family responsibilities (to be discussed later in this chapter).

Selection committees were also required to prepare search plans that documented how they would identify and attract suitably qualified women, casting the recruitment net as widely as possible. Simply advertising positions and relying on traditional networks neither guarantees the best applicants nor gender equity.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor took an active role in such recruitment exercises and often personally spoke or wrote to outstanding people identified as prospective candidates for senior positions to encourage them to responsibilities (even if only filling in for short periods while other people were on leave) and I didn’t feel ready to do this.

“And I’d applied for promotion to senior lecturer and anticipated that it would bring some committee work with it and I really didn’t have much of an idea of how the rest of the University worked.”

During the programme, Loretta’s promotion came through — a double promotion to Associate Professor. “It was entirely unexpected and I felt rather insecure about people’s reactions to it. My promotion was announced at one of the LDW sessions and I got some great support and warmth from some of the women, but I could feel some surprise and even antipathy among some others.

“That was unexpected, given the feeling of support and generosity that was an innate part of the programme. I felt the programme overall was a bit patchy, but I learnt and gained a lot, including some very concrete advice on chairing the foundation across distances, via the Internet.”

Loretta said something she has carried with her since the programme is the realisation that you are part of a system that is greater than your department.

“The mini-kingdom of the department can be a bit stifling and determining for some people. LDW introduced me to another continued on page 51
apply. This personal approach served to reinforce the message that the University was serious about recruiting more women, particularly into leadership positions where they could drive the journey towards gender equity.

It became apparent that for women to succeed in areas where there had been little representation in the past, a supportive culture offering career development and work/life balance was necessary. If this was not in place women would leave. The recruitment of women, therefore, could not be seen in isolation from these factors.

The University began to actively encourage high profile women from other institutions to spend their study leave at UWA and brought out many outstanding women academics through a Distinguished Visitors Scheme. The Raine Re-entry Fellowship was established in 1988 to assist staff to re-enter the academic workforce after taking time out to bear and rear children. The Fellowship is now also open to men whose family responsibilities have taken them away from their work, and academics who have had their careers interrupted while caring for elderly parents or other family members. To commemorate Fay Gale, who retired from the University as Vice-Chancellor in 1997, a Fellowship scheme was also established to support members of the University’s staff with family responsibilities at an early stage in their career to spend a period, normally of not less than three months, working in a university or other educational institution overseas.

Other strategies have been introduced to encourage culture change at a local level. In 1995 the Equity Initiatives Fund was established (later renamed the Diversity Initiatives Fund) to assist departments and work groups to initiate their own projects. Equity and Diversity Advisers located across faculties and locations on the University campus provide a source of informed and confidential advice to staff or students grappling with an equity issue. As the University has become ‘equity mature’, the focus of their role has moved towards fostering good practice at the local level, keeping equity matters on the agenda, identifying gaps, and translating policy into action.

From equity to diversity

At the beginning of the 21st century there was a strategic shift in focus to expand the equity agenda to incorporate diversity, helping to spread the message that the women and men on campus and in society generally, are not homogenous. Indeed, the ‘one size fits all’ approach to addressing the needs of staff had not served women well, often creating systemic barriers to their advancement.

In 2001 the Workforce Diversity Strategy, an employment initiative to actively recruit staff from communities under-represented on campus, was launched. The strategy, focused on the recruitment of staff at entry level in the general staff stream, was designed to provide a more diverse workforce that better reflected the diversity of the student body and the Western Australian community generally. The strategy has been extremely successful; to date the University has recruited more than one hundred employees from the priority areas of Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities and people from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds (with a particular focus on recent immigrants from refugee or humanitarian backgrounds). Not surprisingly, two thirds of the recruits have been women as the main employment opportunities have been clerical and administrative positions. Importantly, however, many of the men recruited through this strategy have taken roles traditionally occupied by women, such as in the Library and in administrative/clerical positions.
ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS: ‘CRITICAL ACTS’, ‘CRITICAL MASS’

“...nothing that the organisers did I felt was stressful to me, because I am sure there would have been things that would have been more, or less comfortable for people, but they were always careful to tell us, “Look if you are not comfortable doing it this way, you can do it that way”, or “If you don’t want to do that part of it, don’t do it”. We were really very much at ease in that sense. There was nothing stressful about it. Yeah.”
Focus group participant

The strategy has been particularly successful in attracting more Indigenous staff to the University, doubling the existing numbers. The UWA Diversity strategy has since been emulated in other organisations in the state public sector and in the higher education sector across Australia. It has also earned the University the prestigious Prime Minister’s Award for the Employment of People with Disabilities for two successive years.

It is a testament to the University’s aspiration to best practice, rather than being driven merely by compliance considerations, that ‘sexual preference’ has been included in the University’s Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action Policy since 1990, twelve years before Western Australia amended the Equal Opportunity Act to render it unlawful to discriminate against people on the grounds of their ‘sexual orientation’ or ‘gender identity’.

In 2001 the University launched its ground breaking Rainbow Project to assess the ‘campus climate’ for staff and students with regard to sexual orientation and to identify key issues and behaviour that might give rise to discrimination. While the Rainbow Project report revealed that UWA generally represents a tolerant and accepting environment, it highlighted the need for a greater level of awareness and proposed that development programmes address sexuality issues.

In response the University, in 2002, launched the Ally Network. The Ally Network seeks to create a more diverse and inclusive culture by promoting greater visibility and awareness of lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender and intersex staff and students (LBGTI), and their concerns. In keeping with other University equity initiatives the Ally Network has received active and visible support from the highest levels of the University leadership. It has stimulated considerable interest in the Australian higher education sector and has already been emulated by another university from the Group of Eight.

PERSONAL STORY

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PERSONAL STORY

community, and my excellent mentor, Colin McLeod provided another perspective on things for me, a different take from some of my colleagues in the department.

“So, as a result, my orientation now is definitely outside the department, within the wider sphere of the University as a whole. LDW made me realise the value of that.”

She said doing the Myer-Briggs personality test during the programme helped her to realise more about the way she thinks, works and communicates.

“I tend to focus on the big picture and get to the end point before those people who spend more time on details. The test was very helpful in understanding how different people work and how I should broach subjects and explain myself to people who think differently from me.”

Loretta is now working from home, after the recent arrival of her second child Felix “making the most of the University’s family-friendly work policies.” With grant money for her research and writing, she has been able to subsidise a break from most of her undergraduate teaching this semester, and her postgraduate students meet her at home, while a nanny looks after Xavier and his younger brother Felix.

“I’m here if they need me, but really, I get fewer interruptions from the children than I would from other people on campus.”
In 2003 the University began the practice of flying the ‘rainbow’ flag during Pride Month to support LGBTI staff, students and members of the community. This powerful symbolic and highly visible act supports the University’s commitment to inclusivity. The Rainbow and Ally strategies have made the campus a ‘safer’ place to be as a ‘minority’ member of the community.

“I mean the whole LDW is about the barriers that just women in general experience and commonly having a family contributes to that. But I don’t think the women in the group had any idea about the additional barriers that being a lesbian is in addition to being a woman. They didn’t have any idea about coming from a culturally different … I mean we did talk about cultural backgrounds, different cultural backgrounds a bit.”
Focus group participant

Achieving life balance – work, flexibility and family responsibilities

Creating an inclusive workplace culture is clearly more complex than just removing unsubtle barriers such as sexist or unwelcome behaviour. For staff to flourish there needs to be a genuine balance between their work and the rest of their life. The final set of ‘critical acts’ to be explored, therefore, is the University’s response to the growing needs of a workforce with family responsibilities. The University has also adopted a broad definition of ‘family’ in recognition of the diversity reflected within the workforce.

While women on the academic staff had been entitled to paid maternity leave some years earlier, it was not until the 1994 Enterprise Agreement that women on the general staff were offered a similar entitlement. Successive iterations of the Agreements have since provided for an expanded emphasis on work and family initiatives resulting in improved access to child care, part-time and shared employment, home-based work, flexible hours and more supportive and flexible leave arrangements.

Unicare, the first child care facility situated on the perimeter of the campus opened in 1972 with twenty places, expanding to 100 places within a decade. It was only in 1992 that the University provided a child care centre for staff. Its original 35 places increased to 47 when the facility moved to purpose-built premises in 2000. While demand continues to outstrip available places, it should be noted that this facility was Western Australia’s first work-based, employee child care centre. Importantly, too, the University has long supported other child care initiatives on campus such as after school care and vacation care. Discussions have begun to further expand child care places in response to staff and student need.

“I’m doing things differently … letting things go when I can have no impact on them … recognising that there are only 24 hours in a day and some things might not be possible in the timeframe.”
2004 participant

“A policy is no good without ‘traction’… maybe we need to train our managers in ways to make family friendly policies, like job sharing, really work.”
2004 participant

“I am now brave enough to demand a fair go.”
Reunion lunch
LDW caused me to stop and think: working at the University does not have to be too “all-consuming” as I have allowed it to become.

Reunion lunch

[Peer learning group discussions] allowed [me] to clarify what I wanted in terms of work/life balance and to respect and to accept other people’s work-life balance or imbalance. Everybody is different and you need to find in yourself what you want in life, work, family, etc.

Reunion lunch

Even when I am not at work I feel like I should be working just because there is all this work to do. After participating in LDW I realise that I am not the only one struggling this way. There are many others learning to set the boundaries like I am.

Reunion lunch

For the first time I compared work/life balance with general administrative staff and got an idea of what their jobs entail. This should make me a more pleasant colleague.

Reunion lunch

While providing work-based care made it somewhat easier for some staff to juggle their work and family responsibilities, academic women in particular continue to express concern that work practices and heavy workloads make it difficult to manage their roles. These concerns were confirmed in the 2003 Working Life Survey which revealed that only 52% of academic staff were satisfied with the balance between their work and the rest of their life compared to 74% of general staff.

These concerns around a lack of life balance were echoed in the 2004 survey (conducted for the 10th anniversary) of LDW participants who identified work/life balance (62%) in response to the question What are the main issues for female employees at UWA in the next ten years? Higher workloads and family responsibility scored 57.5% and 28% respectively. By comparison, childcare, the next most frequently cited issue was listed by only 17% of respondents. While this figure appears low it may be explained by the fact that a high proportion of LDW participants do not have pre-school children.

The University’s most recently certified Enterprise Agreements (January 2005) provide greater flexibility in the way staff balance their parental and family responsibilities to address

LDW can be a life changing experience.

After the programme, some women have succeeded in their careers, some have found a new approach to old issues while others have simply got to know themselves better.

Claire Webb was an early participant and now is involved in running the LDW programme. She has her own story to tell.

The concept of leadership is one of the key ideas of the programme and Claire has found her own definition of it. She refers to a good leader as someone who has a clear vision of the goals and directions in which an organisation should be heading, the ability to communicate to colleagues the way forward and the rationale for achieving this, while inspiring them to follow that vision.

But leadership was not the reason for her taking part in LDW. Claire says she did not see herself as a leader and was unsure if she wanted to be one. Recommendations from colleagues and information on the aims of the programme were just part of the reason she chose to participate in LDW. Being unclear about the future of her career and her work/life balance were also compelling factors. Once involved in the programme, Claire says she didn’t regret her choice.

LDW presented an opportunity to meet new people, to hear different opinions, to voice concerns about common issues and to try to address them. Above all, for Claire the LDW

continued on page 55
these concerns. The Agreements now offer some of the most extensive parental leave provisions in the country and were recently applauded by the federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner. Paid partner leave has doubled. Paid parental leave has increased from 12 to 14 weeks, and provides a return to work bonus of up to an additional period of 22 weeks paid leave that can be taken in a way that suits the primary carer. Importantly, the terminology used in these parental leave clauses is gender neutral.

The Agreements have also expanded what was already an extremely wide choice of flexible work practices, although take up has been limited. This highlights the challenge for the University to encourage ‘life balance’ amongst staff and to mean it. For example, it is important to counter the perception that staff who work part time are not serious about their career as this creates legitimate fears for future career prospects. Because they are funded by external grants, women on the research staff feel particularly vulnerable around pregnancy and family responsibilities as there are no surplus funds to backfill a position when the incumbent takes leave.

**Challenges for the future**

This chapter has chronicled a number of the ‘critical acts’ engaged in by the University in its journey towards gender equity. Since the representation and distribution of women on both the academic and general staff still remains an issue, it is timely now to reflect on the concept of a ‘critical mass’ of women that make a workplace responsive to, and inclusive of women.

The research of Kanter (1977) and Pettigrew and Martin (1987) suggests that there are critical points in the levels of representation of women in the workforce that will determine their experience of gender relations. Below 20% and women are a small and insignificant minority. Above 20% representation they are likely to experience a backlash from the dominant group as the glass ceiling begins to crack. This was the position of women on the academic staff in 1990. When women reach 40% of the workforce their morale soars, and gender relations are much more likely to be balanced and equitable. By 2004 women comprised 35% of the academic staff.

Kanter provides a warning, however, for those workforces where women become the predominant sex, at about 60% representation. It is then, she suggests, that women are in danger of their contribution becoming devalued and stereotyped as ‘women’s work’. History has shown us that a lack of wage parity and diminished employment conditions possibly follow. The employment conditions and status of teachers may give weight to this theory.

The dilemma for the University now is that women comprise 62% of the general staff. While the increasing recruitment and retention of these women has assisted the University to achieve a gender balanced workforce, there is a danger that there will be diminishing opportunities for men at lower classification levels to make a contribution and that the work of the general staff will be undervalued or taken for granted. Some members of the general staff would suggest that this may already be the case, and that concerns about the general/academic divide remain some years after it first surfaced in the reviews of women conducted in the mid 1990s.

A further and related challenge for the University is to ensure that women are distributed more equitably across classification levels rather than compressed into the lower salary levels. The University carefully monitors the Equity Index¹ score for its male and female workforce. The Equity Index (EI) reveals the extent to which a certain occupational or identity
group are inequitably clustered in the lower salary ranges despite their level of representation generally. An equity index score of 100 would indicate that whatever the percentage representation of people in the group being measured, they are distributed proportionally across the classification levels. A score higher than 100 indicates the extent to which the group being measured is over represented in the senior classification levels. While the University’s equity index scores for general staff women are now consistently the highest in the WA university sector, and the equity index for female academic staff has dramatically risen, there is still room for improvement.

In 2004 the EI for academic women was 55 and for academic men 130. The index for women general staff was 81, while the EI for men was 120. Highlighting the advantaged position of men in the University workforce is indicative of the increasing sophistication with which the organisation is addressing the issue of gender equity. The focus is no longer on the deficit, on what needs to happen to or for women in order for equity to be achieved. Rather, the focus now is also on the ‘privilege’ that flows to men where there is a gendered workforce that more consistently meets the needs of, and shapes itself to the preferred working styles of, men (Eveline 1998).

The increasing number of appointments made of women into the senior levels of University management, including Deans and on the Executive, was noted previously. For senior women on the general staff, however, the picture is less positive. Women comprise only 36% of the staff at Level 10 and above, the highest classification band for the general staff and the group from which senior management is drawn. In particular there are female-dominated areas of the predominantly general staff workforce, such as the Library, Student Services and Human Resources that do not currently have a woman in the top job and, in one instance, have not had one for forty-five years.

A further challenge for the University is to create a culture where working flexibly or part time does not hinder career opportunities. The results of the LDW survey demonstrate that some women continue to feel vulnerable around adopting flexible work practices or extended parental leave because it may give the impression they are not serious about their career. Thirty-five per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: I have experienced gender-related barriers to my career progression at UWA in the last 5 years.

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One of the strongest points of the programme, Claire says, is giving participants confidence in their professional skills and personal choices. “Getting to know themselves through the programme encourages women to try different strategies to succeed in their careers or find their niche in the workplace,” she said.

Claire gives the example of her situation as a part-time worker. “Having a good mix between your work and personal life and not being stretched in too many directions at once is what I define as a good work/life balance,” she said.

To create that balance she chose to work three days a week, keeping her working time flexible when necessary and separate from her personal time where possible. She has tried to maintain the balance by not taking work home or working too many extra hours, except at very busy times.

“I used to get negative comments from colleagues about my choice to work part time,” said Claire. “People would say things like ‘we’ll see you when you next decide to come in’ or ‘I never know when you’re going to be at work’. Some colleagues would jokingly imply that I didn’t work hard because I wasn’t
These concerns were documented in the 2003 Working Life Survey, most particularly amongst the female research staff. Almost 30% of the female research staff respondents experienced a ‘great deal’ of difficulty arranging parental leave, and 62% of female research staff were dissatisfied with their opportunities for career progression or promotion, compared to 47% of male respondents.

The generous parental leave provisions contained in the 2005 Enterprise Agreement will not, for the most part, benefit academic research staff, 45% of whom are women, given the funding sources of their salaries and fixed-term nature of their employment. These employment arrangements do not appear to be ‘family friendly’, which is particularly disturbing given that 71% of these staff are under 40 years of age.

Over time the University has changed its equity focus. Increasingly it sees that a workplace culture characterised by inclusivity and respect is central to building a harmonious and productive organisation. It cannot, therefore, tolerate bullying, increasingly seen as a major workplace issue across Australia. The effective management of bullying has become a priority for the University. It is being addressed in the context of Australian research that suggests bullying is often the product of increasing workload pressures and workplace stress, compounded by underdeveloped people-management skills, conditions manifest in most contemporary workplaces.

Although bullying is strongly linked to workplace power differentials, not only women complain of bullying, and not only men are perceived to exhibit this behaviour. It may be the case, however, that women are particularly vulnerable to such behaviour. The University is developing a strategy to better align the workplace climate with the principles espoused in its Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct. It will also be addressed through the newly developed performance management processes.

A beacon of light

“I have noticed a big culture change, especially the increased number of women who now hold positions in the decision-making roles/areas.”

— Reunion lunch

While women continue to report that gender is still a barrier in their careers, their level of satisfaction with the University as a workplace for women is high. Over three quarter of respondents (77%) to the LDW survey agreed or strongly agreed that the current culture was ‘women friendly’. This satisfaction has been reflected elsewhere. In a 2002 National Tertiary Education Union (Winfield et al. 2002) survey of academic and general staff in 17 Australian universities UWA respondents had the highest work satisfaction ratings of all participating institutions.

A survey conducted in 1999 by Craig McInnis (1999) found that women academics in Australian universities were less satisfied than their male colleagues. The reverse was true, however, in the data gathered from the 2000 UWA Working Life Survey, and confirmed again in the 2003 survey. Research staff in general appear particularly satisfied.

What accounts for this high level of satisfaction with the University as a place to work? This account of the movement towards gender equity argues that it has been the significant ‘critical acts’ supported by unwavering commitment from the Executive and senior staff as well as the groundswell of support and energy provided by a ‘critical mass’ of women, most notably the LDW graduates, who have seen the beacon of light and stood strong in the journey.
I made a positive change to my workplace culture; I stood up for what I knew was right.
2004 participant

Encouraging inclusiveness, social interaction and team building led to a better workplace culture.
2004 participant

[Being a manager/leader] includes recognising the power of a positive workplace culture.
2004 participant

struggled to impact on cultural change in my department and largely gave up … except the insights were useful in terms of thinking about new staff and how I might be of assistance to them.
Reunion lunch

at work all the time. It was also frustrating when meetings that I needed to attend were organised on days when I didn’t work”. But LDW gave her confidence in her decision to work part-time without feeling guilty.

It reaffirmed Claire’s choice of a good work/life balance. She has become more strategic: making clear her working hours to colleagues, leaving messages on her answering machine, making people aware when she is and isn’t available. “Working part-time is a matter of give and take. I’m flexible and will fit my time around work commitments if I can, but I’ve also learned not to feel guilty if that’s not possible. I’m not afraid to request that meetings be scheduled on days when I am at work, and I make a point of standing up for others who work part time if necessary”.

Claire’s experience is just one example of how LDW impacts on the lives of its participants and the kinds of changes that can occur in women’s lives as a result of the programme.

Footnotes

1 The Equity Index (EI) was first developed in Canada in 1990 by the Task Force on Barriers to Women in the Public Service. The EI, as defined by the Task Force, is a measure of ‘compression’;
• the extent to which women in a given occupational group are primarily to be found at the lower classification levels
• Subsequently the EI was significantly modified by the WA Office of EEO to make it more stable and to enable statistical analysis.
2 http://www.hr.uwa.edu.au/publications/discussion_docs/working_life_surveys/2000
3 http://www.hr.uwa.edu.au/publications/discussion_docs/working_life_surveys/2003