Women and identity

No programme will meet everyone’s needs at all times. While LDW is a women-only programme, women do not form a homogenous group. There are many other aspects of women’s lives and identities which may, at any given time, take precedence over their identity as women. For example, Indigenous women may have a much stronger sense of identity as an Indigenous person, and find little in common with a group of women who are not. There may also be times when they want to speak and position themselves as women first and foremost. In the same way lesbian women may identify at times more strongly with their gay male colleagues than with heterosexual women; yet, at other times, it will be what they have in common with all women that will be more pertinent. Women bring many identities to the LDW programme. For each individual woman, however, identity is rarely fixed or unified around only one set of interests or needs. Social identities are fluid, they are “multiple and constructed in relation to others as opposed to fixed, unitary and essential” (Holvino & Sheridan 2003:2). Instead, women regularly negotiate their way through different contexts of expectations, pressures and allegiances, all of which help to determine how they align and project their identity at any given time.

Why should this concern the LDW programme? The capacity of the LDW programme to be inclusive and relevant to the full diversity of women on campus, and to do so in ways sensitive to their multiple and complex needs and identities, has been a recurring point of discussion for the Planning Group. There have been no easy answers to their concerns, or to criticism levelled at the programme over the years. One practical small step that has been taken since 2002 is the placing of the following statement in advertising material: Applications from Indigenous women and those from culturally diverse backgrounds are particularly encouraged. Additionally, when the constitution for the Planning Group was reviewed in 2004, the inclusion of members with diverse backgrounds was added to the group composition requirements.
The claim that LDW is mono-cultural, for white women only, was most strongly voiced in the early years. It has been dispelled, at least in more recent years, by a quick glance at the group photos (taken since 1999). The LDW programme has clearly enjoyed a diversity of participants. It was a woman of colour, who when asked about feeling comfortable in the group noted, — I wasn’t the only one. While the photos highlight visible difference, however, they do not allow us to know if the women have less visible differences; they may, for example, have an invisible disability, have English as a second language, be lesbian, or come from diverse cultural or religious backgrounds.

Respondents to the survey, as outlined in Chapter 2 identified themselves as follows:

• 6% spoke a language other than English as main language at home
• 17% consider themselves to be part of a racial, ethnic or cultural minority, and
• 4% considered themselves to have a permanent or long-term disability.

The University does not have University-wide statistics to allow us to compare this to the broader staff population.

Creed and Scully (2000) in their research exploring the conditions for creating a safe, equitable and welcoming work environment, note that,

Inclusivity is a challenge when visible social identities trigger potentially judgemental and divisive reactions. A distinct set of challenges arises when employees bring invisible, marginalized, or even stigmatized aspects of their identity into the workplace (Creed & Scully 2000:391).

The accounts of difference, as reflected in the stories of the women interviewed, carry that subtext. Visible and invisible differences create different choices, different issues. Women with invisible disabilities share common dilemmas with lesbian women, for example, around disclosing their disability or sexual identity. Those with visible differences must deal directly with people’s responses, while those with invisible differences spend time monitoring the climate and conversation for any signs of tolerance and safety that would allow disclosure.

It would be hypocritical of a programme working towards an inclusive and welcoming workplace for women to ignore other dimensions of diversity, other social identities, other aspects of women’s experience of inclusion or exclusion. Issues of dominant and non dominant groups, differences in privilege or advantage, dominating knowledges — these all occur inside an all-female group. Surfacing and acknowledging this is, however, more difficult.

There are many parallels between the LDW programme seeking to embrace diversity and organisations engaged in the same process. The Centre for Gender in Organizations (CGO) has been actively engaged in research in this area for some time. They stress the importance of moving beyond gender to include other aspects of what they call ‘identity group relations’, that is, to attend to multiple aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexual identity and religion (Ely & Meyerson 1999). Itzin (1995), as referred to in Chapter 3, describes this as maintaining a ‘multifaceted lens’, rather than a gender lens.
**Surfacing diversity**

Most of what we come to regard as normal and commonplace at work tends to privilege traits that are socially and culturally ascribed to men while devaluing or ignoring those ascribed to women (Kolb et al. 1998:3).

This quote taken from *CGO Briefing Note #1* is our entry point to discussing advantage and disadvantage on the LDW programme in recent years. While it focuses on gender privilege, this concept is easily extended to include others who do not fit the prevailing norm. As Ely and Meyerson observe,

‘Women’ and ‘men’ are not monolithic categories. The nature of privilege and disadvantage that men and women experience are structured in large part by other aspects of their identity, such as race, ethnicity, national identity, sexual identity and class background (Ely & Meyerson 1999:2).

Ely and Meyerson go on to point out that organisations that keep many groups out of the mainstream create ‘mono-cultural organisations’, despite ‘multicultural workforces’. In the same way it may be possible for LDW to create a ‘mono-cultural programme’ despite a broader participant mix. Of critical importance is the concern that the differences, visible or invisible, women bring to the programme are respected and acknowledged. Does the programme allow women to bring the fullness of themselves or do they leave some part of their identities outside the door? Do gender, white ethnocentricity, heterosexuality, and normative able-bodiedness become such overriding features of the programme that all other differences must become invisible?

**Talking with the women**

The tenth anniversary and the evaluation of the programme for this publication provided an ideal opportunity to explore these questions and concerns further. An external consultant, Marie Finlay, was engaged to interview participants and conduct focus groups with women that the LDW staff could identify as belonging to groups of interest. This was by no means a complete way of selecting the women identified as ‘minority voices’ (ie women of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds; women of diverse sexuality; and women with a disability) who may have wished to be included. A total of 47 women were approached to participate. Despite the relatively large number of women identified as culturally and linguistically diverse, or as women of colour, the take-up from them was relatively small, in contrast to the enthusiastic response of the lesbian women, who constituted a much smaller group. While LDW women were identified and invited from all programme years, participants in interviews and focus groups spanned the years 1999 – 2003.

Participants were women of all ages and with a range of family responsibilities. Three focus groups were conducted — with culturally and linguistically diverse women (group of three), lesbian women (group of four) and women of colour (group of three). In addition, interviews were conducted with three women with a disability, one transgender woman, and one Indigenous woman. The questions invited the women to reflect on their LDW experience and to identify what was successful for them in the programme, what in the process worked for them and what did not, and whether inclusivity was an issue both within the programme and in the wider University community.

**Being singled out as ‘different’**

I must say when I got the email I was quite surprised, because I suppose I had never internalised that I was a minority group.

I don’t really think of myself as a woman of colour.
The first response to calls for interviews for many women was the question, *how am I a minority?* The majority of women contacted did not see themselves as belonging to a minority group. In part this may have been due to clumsy language and categories that were inadequate. One woman expressed concern about how she had been identified. Most women identified themselves as professionals at work and women in general. Having a disability, for example, was simply an additional aspect of identity. For others, such as the Indigenous woman, Indigenous identity was highlighted.

There were also different constructions of minority and difference. In our choices of ‘identity groups’, we have constructed ‘otherness’, making value judgements about the kinds of ‘identity groups’ that the programme was interested in knowing more about. It was useful to have that challenged and broadened out by the women themselves. Being in the minority occurred, for example, for academic women working in male dominated areas, for women working in disciplines where their research interest is seen as peripheral, or where ‘soft scientists’ are located in hard science areas.

Another issue that emerged, as a result of our small sample, is the difficulty in interviewing solo ‘representatives’ of particular groups, where, by default, they can be seen as speaking on ‘their’ group’s behalf. This is the case particularly for the Indigenous woman and the transgender woman. Women can find themselves in this uncomfortable position in groups where they are the only women, with the choices of somehow representing all women or feeling silenced by their minority status both unpalatable. However this experience may also be paralleled in the programme itself, where to identify as belonging to a minority group can present this same dilemma.

LDW has only had one Indigenous woman participate in the programme, and would welcome further participation. Feedback received through this evaluation process may be useful in furthering dialogue with the

**Until you address the problems for women as a whole, … can’t address issues of minority women.**

Male mentor

**HOW AM I A MINORITY?**

When we hear about age being an issue in the workplace, we assume its older people who are being discriminated against.

But one UWA staff member found it very difficult being young. She doesn’t want to be identified, so we’ll call her Heather.

“I started research work in Faculty X at the age of 24, in a management role,” she said.

“I’d come from private enterprise and I was used to dealing with management and working in a position of management. But working on a research project off campus, I was discriminated against to the point that I felt uncomfortable going in to work each day.”

Heather was the co-ordinator of the research project. She said it was not the norm for someone with her background to co-ordinate projects, so, along with her age, it meant that she was viewed with suspicion.

“I kept out of the tea room gossip. They just didn’t include me because of our age difference.”

Heather said the team she worked with saved her from walking out, but she still felt isolated, so she applied to do the LDW programme, needing some self-development and wanting to see what was happening on campus.

“LDW became such an important support group because I was under such stress in my work,” Heather said.

She had responded to the discrimination

continued on page 77
Indigenous community on campus. While it has been suggested that a separate programme may be appropriate, given the small numbers of women, a modified programme model may be required. A ‘women only’ programme may also not be considered appropriate (see discussion above).

**Successes**

In the focus groups and interviews the women did not talk about personal stories of achievement, but focused on the relationships and networks they developed and the shifts in perception that developed awareness and opened possibilities for them.

> Doing LDW was really good because it brought me into close contact with people on campus and I sort of realised although we work in different areas, we have a lot of similarities and face a lot of the same issues.

The most consistent story to emerge was the value of the networks that were established. These varied from forming deep and enduring relationships, ongoing walking groups, to occasional catch-up lunches and the comfort of *recognising people as you walked around the campus and at social functions*. The idea of a network was new to some of the women, and indeed, one woman remarked that she had had no female friends since coming to Australia.

As many of the women felt isolated in their workplaces and in the issues they were dealing with, there was relief at finding other women experiencing similar difficulties in their work lives. It meant they no longer felt or were alone.

They enjoyed the *connection* with the other women, personally and collectively, the openness of the group and process enabled them to *let their guard down* and the talking and connections across campus were very useful. Knowing other people in other offices made getting information easier.

> And it actually has worked in that I have established a lot of collaboration with some people in the department, and I am much happier in my work.

The opportunity to talk over issues with other women in the programme helped to keep at least one woman in the organisation.

> Before I joined the programme I was pretty close to resigning because I just couldn’t cope with it any more [suffering under the leadership of the Head of School and feeling she was not being taken seriously as a professional].

One woman felt constrained by lack of time, not only to reflect, but to talk to other people due to the pressure of her work. For her the network provided the space and time to reflect and focus on her work life.

> One of the most important things I found in the programme was the time to actually reflect on your work and your career…it has left me with the idea that OK you can set yourself some goals, you can actually think about what is going on.

In this respect, reflecting on the connections that LDW makes possible, the women we had singled out as ‘diverse’ are echoing the survey data and other materials from the broader participant group.
Programme components
The programme has changed shape over time, adding peer learning groups (in 2002) with some variation in the range of ongoing workshops offered, so, to some extent, the women participating in focus group discussions had experienced different programmes. Coverage of diversity issues has also varied, with different presenters being used over time. In the late 1990s diversity was raised towards the end of the programme. In the last few years, however, it has been discussed earlier on. Diversity has not been a topic easily picked up by participants. Conversations and responses have focused on a huge range of differences including youth, older age, family responsibilities, private schooling, educational attainments, first language, general and academic staff status, born in Perth and so on. There has been a great reluctance to discuss racial or cultural background, sexuality, and disability, suggesting that these issues are ‘undiscussables’. Proudfoot (2002:1), drawing on the work of Argyris, defines ‘undiscussables’ as those “issues or dynamics within organisations that everyone knows should not be raised”.

As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than forces for change (Audrey Lorde 1983).

The two-day retreat at the commencement of the programme has remained constant throughout. Many women recall it as the ‘best bit’ of the LDW programme (as documented in Chapter 2). It did not suit everyone, however, with several women commenting that it did not suit their learning styles. Several did not maintain the early enthusiasm and intensity of the two-day core programme. These women drew particular attention to the loss of the larger group experience as attendances at ongoing workshops waivered according to work commitments, or to the inevitable absences of some participants due to travel and holidays. Any sense of not belonging, or a loss of an earlier sense of connection, became more apparent in these women as the programme continued.

Toward the end of the year it is harder as your motivation and the momentum dies down and you think, ‘Oh, this work is more important than LDW’ whereas at the start it is, ‘Oh, I really want to go so I will do this in the evening’.

Learning new skills from LDW, Heather tried again asking for help and, this time, she was heard. “When I told them that I wasn’t coping and that my pleas for help had been ignored, I was told that I needed to talk louder. I had thought I was screaming!”

She said LDW gave her strength, both to carry on and to make herself heard. Her peer learning group was made up of young academics, who all had problems with their work/life balance.

“We all benefited from sharing our experiences and helping each other to get the balance right. It was a great, supportive group and we still keep in touch. While doing LDW I made some decisions about my future, including doing my PhD. My peer group’s honest advice and personal experiences about studying for a PhD helped me realise exactly what I was getting myself in to.”

Heather said that what she learned from against her in her workplace by working hard and becoming a high achiever. When she moved from there to a different school she was happier to be in a younger crowd, but was still feeling stressed.

“So somebody said I had dug my own grave: I had showed that I could achieve a lot, so it was expected of me from then on.

“I felt I was drowning, just keeping my head above water. I had asked for help but nobody heard me.”

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Peer learning groups

The peer learning groups were applicable only for women who participated in LDW from 2002 onwards. Peer learning groups have the potential to exacerbate or overcome feelings of not belonging experienced by some of the women. While small groups could make it safer to disclose personal information, lack of acknowledgement of difference could increase feelings of isolation. It became clear in the focus groups that peer learning groups had worked for some of the participants and not for others.

What I found really worked for me was the peer groups. To work very closely and to actually have to think outside your zone, and come up with something constructive — I really enjoyed that.

The peer group learning didn’t work, waste of time.

For this latter woman the peer group was dysfunctional, and she felt isolated and resentful about people not turning up to meetings. She wondered about their commitment. She also felt isolated in the small group: [I] had nothing in common with the other women. Even in the larger workshops they used to sit together and she lost the connection with the larger group.

For some there was too much focus in the peer learning groups on the presentation, (as discussed in Chapter 3) and this got in the way of the intended learning process. For others it highlighted their tendency to sit back and let the ‘strong’ women do it. This was expressed as both an issue of language and lack of confidence in public speaking.

Mentoring

Mentoring is examined in detail in Chapter 7. While the research acknowledges that cross-cultural mentoring adds another layer of complexity to the establishment of effective mentoring partnerships (Crosby 1999; Ragins 1999; Blake-Beard 2001), it was beyond the scope of this research to identify pairs where this was the case. Given the lack of visible diversity in senior management at UWA, however, and the number of mentors from the senior ranks, it is probably safe to assume this was a factor for most of the minority women. Mentoring proved to be a mixed experience (as it was for the larger group) with some of the women gaining a great deal from the relationship, and even continuing the relationship beyond the programme.

I think it was just that tremendous moral support all the way through and then through the mentoring.

My mentor ended up being a friend, a confidante and now Head of School.

For others it was a disappointing experience. There were a number of explanations offered for the breakdown. Some ascribed the ‘failure’ of the relationship to gender difference.

People who, for some reason, cannot tell their story are at a great disadvantage.

We need to be heard, to be affirmed and welcomed as one who shares the human condition.

To be ourselves we must have ourselves — possess, if need be, repossess our life stories.

Oliver Sacks
I don’t know, sometimes it doesn’t work out and that’s probably because of the difference in the gender between the mentor and mentee.

…..and for dealing with issues that may arise specific to women, you might have to have someone more senior, a woman you can talk to as well.

The match between the mentee and mentor was an issue for some.

Met a couple of times … We just didn’t click.

I didn’t have a strong sense her experience related to mine.

Lack of focus was another issue for one woman mentee: I just didn’t know what I wanted. And finally, as in the wider survey data a lack of time and commitment.

Some of these comments mirror issues that are raised in the next chapter, such as time, lack of focus and mentoring partnerships that did not get started. It is not possible to tell if the mentoring relationships of this select group were more or less successful than other women on the programme. Keeping track of ‘cross-identity’ mentoring would be beneficial – to allow further exploration of any difficulties in future evaluations.

Inclusivity

Belonging is very very important. I don’t think we could be happy if we didn’t belong, and felt as though we were valued in whatever small role we do.

I can see that in the instances where I have felt on the outside, I don’t feel comfortable going to work when I feel that way, when I know there is all this indifference even. You like to be more than just tolerated or seen as doing your job, but more proactively included.

While the majority of the women said they felt included in the programme, they generally felt that there was no room in the larger group to raise issues that were particular to their minority identity.

Most inclusive thing I have ever done … emotionally liberating.

We had a quite diverse group. I think everyone is very open and inclusive.

LDW had had a dramatic effect on her life. From being an overachiever to compensate for her youth, she now has a better work/life balance, is able to ask for help when she needs it, and is focusing on herself and her needs as she starts her doctorate.

“What was so hard was that I felt strong and confident but I just wasn’t coping and I couldn’t work out what was going on. LDW helped me to work it out.”
I was interested in looking at the differences more.

For women of diverse sexuality issues regarding inclusion are related to issues of self disclosure. The work of the ‘Rainbow’ and ‘Ally’ projects at UWA have highlighted issues of ‘coming out’ and safety (from discrimination) for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) staff and students on campus (Goody & de Vries 2002). The relative invisibility of GLBTI staff is one indicator of ‘the cultural climate’ for this group of staff, indicating a perceived lack of safety, and there are known pockets of intolerance and homophobia.

For GLBTI staff managing their ‘identity’ comes at the cost of guardedness, discomfort, feeling unsafe and a constant fear of being ‘discovered’. This managing of identity was reflected in comments made in the focus group where it was felt strongly that they could not participate in group or social conversations about work/life balance, husbands and children and, because they didn’t have that life situation, they ‘felt on the outer’.

During those catch-up sessions, I would never reveal anything … I didn’t feel that there would be reciprocity [in terms of listening] if I started to talk about my girlfriend.

It was a bit galling. I want to have children and to hear others complaining was frustrating.

At the same time there was recognition that this would also be an issue for others.

I did find that too much at times, you know, family and kids and just absolutely no recognition of women, whether they be lesbian or not, who don’t have children.

The lesbian women chose not to reveal themselves in the group.

The programme is geared to stereotypical women in the organisation. If I’d ‘come out’ I would have been a curiosity and that would have put me out further.

[There is] just this issue of not ever actually talking about your life to them. It isn’t really a big issue, but is something that just does make us behave slightly differently.

There were instances in relation to their careers where the women had felt subtly discriminated against, or feared discrimination might occur.

[There are] invisible barriers, if you like, to advancing positions. There may be other things that prevent you from going forward, which need I think to be acknowledged. You know, disabilities and such. I think, I mean, it is a significant barrier to me, I think in my career. I mean, there is absolutely no way, for instance, that I could have a senior position in my part of the organisation and be openly lesbian. I mean, they wouldn’t think it was good for the public image.

This feeling of exclusion was echoed by a woman with a degenerative disease, who did not feel included in the larger group, and said she felt like a fish out of water a lot of the time. This she attributed in part to her transition from wellness to disability, and to the fact that she felt that there was no opportunity on LDW to raise her issues. While she did disclose her condition at the time, she is much more reticent now, particularly in the workplace. She wonders if visibly disabled women are more acceptable, more able to discuss their difficulties and to have adequate assistance and consideration.
The notion of being visibly different arose in several of the groups; the sense that if you are seen to be different (i.e., a woman who is clearly Asian) that it is easier to both raise issues and to be excluded. For the transgender woman her sexuality was more visible than the lesbian women and this had resulted in a lack of choice about being ‘out’. She had experienced periods of extreme isolation in the workplace.

‘Women of colour’ felt that their visibility was not so much in their colour but in their accent.’

*I think people react more to accent than to colour… with the result that they are not as open, because as soon as an accent comes out they think, “Oh we won’t understand them”.*

These women felt that this closer scrutiny also applied, for example, to white women with European accents. One commented too on the way in which surnames became a marker of difference and unequal visibility.

*I guess for us Asians it is very easy to pick out because of our surnames. So you would just go by that.*

**Issues of voice**

The issues of voice were most evident in the focus group for ‘women of colour’. Initially one of the women expressed concern that she could have to say something negative about the programme, and she felt uncomfortable about that. Several women spoke extremely softly during the interview, which meant that their comments were not recorded. Some said that during the programme they often hesitated to put themselves forward because of a lack of confidence in language.

We were quite happy to play a back stage role.

..because you feel that you don’t speak as well, you know, like excellent or something, so you feel a bit uncomfortable and you might say, ‘Oh I think I might as well not do it, let the other ladies who can speak better.

I feel I am not discriminated against in anything. So I feel very comfortable there [in the workplace]. Except I think when it comes to speaking out. It just feels like…..I still don’t feel comfortable standing up in front or speaking to a group. I guess it takes practice.

**Inclusion in the wider organisation**

In general the women felt that the University was more inclusive than the general population.

People at the University are much more unbiased towards race and colour than the general public.

They applauded the organisation’s policies and practices around equal opportunity, diversity and bullying, though they felt that these polices were often not adhered to by managers and senior people.

*… the organisation is big on policy….not with the nitty gritty of dealing with people with special needs … policy doesn’t translate to management level, there is not much willingness to make adjustments.*

Comments regarding the policy/practice gap were made particularly strongly by women with a disability, with particular reference to degenerative conditions and the associated transition process. There was
a perception that those employed through a disability programme were being treated with more consideration and care.

Improving the programme

All women agreed that they would like more up-front discussion of diversity and difference in the programme and more representation of their ‘identity’ group in visitors to the programme, perhaps in a panel, for example. There was little recognition that it had been discussed or addressed in the programme, with only passing reference to we talked about it a bit. It may be that having the session at a follow-up workshop where not all women attend is insufficient profile and that it needs to be consciously raised on multiple occasions.

It would be good to have these issues in the consciousness rather than under the carpet.

A welcome to country and increased consultation with Indigenous women would be helpful.

Conclusion

It is hard to do justice to the women’s stories, to feel confident that their stories have been sufficiently understood to be communicated in this format, and problematic to see their stories are representative of the ‘identity groups’ to which they belong. We have not asked to hear the stories of white women, or heterosexual women, or Australian women or able-bodied women and the ways in which they may feel included or excluded, both in the programme and in the wider University. There has been insufficient attention paid to the intersections of identity, as we chose people to fit into different groups on the basis of one identity, without querying other ways in which they experience difference.

Despite these limitations there are some important messages here for the LDW programme and the broader institution to hear. The stories above give a mixed picture. Women felt both included and excluded within the LDW programme and also within the broader institution. While for some women their minority group status is a non-event, others feel unsafe in the workplace regarding self-revelation about, for example, the existence of a same sex partner, anger at a lack of understanding or accommodation in regard to disability, and a lack of confidence that discrimination of various types would not occur. There are messages about issues of language and accent, about difficulties in meeting the needs of Indigenous women, and about ways in which ‘otherness’ can be experienced.

There are obvious difficulties for organisations when employees cannot bring their full selves to work or when they are unable to fully contribute because they lack confidence or feel they do not belong. Creed and Scully (2000) suggest that employees who ‘can enact their authentic selves’ might contribute more fully to the workplace. In attempting to create cultural change to make the University more inclusive of women, LDW must also address broader diversity and inclusivity issues.

This is the cutting edge for analysing and addressing organisational culture for programmes such as LDW.

If we have no story we are nobody. We are lost in the darkness, there is no light.

David Mowanjali, Aboriginal elder, Yorro Yorro.