

# WOMEN'S EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE WEXDEV MODEL

*Dr Colleen Chesterman, National Director, ATN WEXDEV, Australia*

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The Australian higher education sector has undergone major structural changes over the past fifteen years. In 1987, a unified national system, consisting of 37 publicly funded universities, was created out of a previous binary system of universities, institutes of technology and colleges of advanced education. Over the same period student numbers have increased by over 50%, staff numbers have increased, though with many in part-time or casual employment, and with a tightening of the funds available from the central government, fee-paying courses and fee-paying overseas students have increased. The sector is widely seen as under considerable strain.

During the same period, universities in Australia have been covered by the provisions of federal affirmative action legislation, although some states already had such legislation in place. This legislation requires organisations to report annually on the actions taken to improve women's and other disadvantaged groups' employment opportunities. Despite the potential strength of this legislation, the situation in Australian universities at the end of 1999 shows a continued pattern of inequity in women's employment in universities. Statistics collected by the Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs show the proportions of men and women in the different general staff grades in 1999, demonstrating a funnelling syndrome by which women are concentrated in lower graded occupations although it should be noted that the percentage of women at executive level has increased from 26% in 1996, the figures analysed by Probert et al (1998).

<b>Table 1: Percentage of general staff levels by sex, Australia, 1999 (fte)</b>		
<b>Higher Education Worker Scale Levels</b>	<b>Women %</b>	<b>Men %</b>
HEW Level 4 and below (Support Staff)	68.1%	31.9%
HEW Levels 5-9 (Middle Management)	54.1%	45.9%
Above HEW Level 10 (Executive)	34.6%	65.4%

DETYA statistics also show differences between male and female academics, with women academics dominating the lower grades and men the senior levels, as shown in Table 2. This Table shows both tenurable and limited term positions.

<b>Table 2: Percentage of academic staff levels by sex, Australia, 1999</b>		
<b>Level in Academic Scale</b>	<b>Women %</b>	<b>Men %</b>
Below Lecturer	50.4%	49.6%
Lecturer	42.7%	57.3%
Senior Lecturer	27.8%	72.2%
Above Senior Lecturer	15.4%	84.6%

There have been four recent major research reports that provide compelling evidence of gender inequity and these have been usefully summarised by Sullivan (1999). Castleman et al (1995) study payroll data from 10 universities in South Australia and Victoria and show women lag behind men in achieving permanency and seniority. Deane et al (1996) investigate women's disadvantage in research and demonstrate the complex interaction between institutional profile, discipline and seniority in gaining research support. Burton

(1997) undertook a major survey of all Australian universities to tease out the major issues facing equal opportunity in employment, identifying problems in theory and in practice and suggesting ways forward. Burton places particular emphasis on the 'masculine culture' of institutions, which she defines as reflecting not only values and priorities but also the structural arrangements in which they become embedded. She identifies in universities 'employment terms and conditions, policies, practices and reward structures (that) historically have been organised around the cluster of characteristics, attributes and background circumstances typical of men' (pp17-19). In another major national study Probert et al (1998) point to significant disadvantage in relation to pay equity, permanency and classification experienced by women in higher education. The researchers emphasise the different experience between general (administrative) and academic staff, using the DEETYA statistics for 1997 and their own survey. The study produces powerful quantitative evidence that, even when qualifications, level of employment and length of tenure are controlled, there remains a significant pay differential between men and women general staff. It is suggested by the researchers that there is in fact little logical basis for the splitting of work responsibilities between classifications, suggesting that work is under-valued simply because women do it. In analysing the data for academic staff Probert et al suggest that inequity relates to the impact of late entry, career breaks and domestic responsibilities on women. A lower proportion of women (36%) hold PhDs than men (56%) and women have less years in academic employment. Probert provides a more detailed analysis of the results for five universities in ATN WEXDEV 1999(b).

Reports show significant under-representation of women in particular at senior levels in higher education, a situation Australia shares with the international university community. The numbers of women in senior management positions in universities, while growing, are still so unrepresentative as to provide evidence of continuing systemic and cultural barriers to women's progress. Universities in Australia have attracted significant criticism for their lack of inclusive managerial structures and development opportunities for senior women. (Ramsay (1995), Higher Education Management Review Committee 1996.) The lack of diversity in management has negative implications for universities' future viability and capacity to respond to change.

There has been a number of national calls for the sector to address the issue of equity more concertedly, leading to the establishment in 1994 of the national Colloquium of Senior Women Executives in Australian Higher Education. The background to the establishment of this lobby group is outlined by one of the founders Eleanor Ramsay in ATN WEXDEV 1999b, p 72. In 1998, the Colloquium prepared a paper based on the findings of the recent research reports and approached the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC), arguing that the sector as a whole should take greater responsibility for ensuring that women in both academic and administrative fields are able to meet the strong qualifications barriers demonstrated by the sector. The AVCC has responded and in July 1999 adopted an action plan until 2003 targeting specific improvements in the situation of women in higher education. The Action Plan (AVCC 1999) has three main elements

- 'to exert the AVCC's leadership to promote the achievement of gender equity in Australia;
- to develop strategies based on research for overcoming barriers to gender equity for university staff;
- to refine the AVCC and university staff development services to target gender equity more effectively.'

The Action Plan also commits each of Australia's universities to undertake its own specific actions in support of the plan. The AVCC will review progress against the plan each year, will ensure equal representation of women on committees and delegations and will sponsor more detailed research including analysis of career paths of selected groups of general staff

and a study of career supports and weighting given to teaching and research in academic promotion.

### **Existing Leadership Programs**

The AVCC Action Plan has not emerged in a vacuum. A number of Australian universities have active equity and equal opportunity offices, and some are rated as top level performers by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) which replaced the Affirmative Action Agency in 1999. A number of universities also run Women and Leadership and /or Women and Executive Development programs. Fifteen of these programs are summarised in a publication by the Australian Technology Network Women's Executive Development Program (ATN WEXDEV 1999c). This booklet analyses the different foci of the projects, in relation to target group, number of participants and aims and objectives. The discussion enabled practitioners to consider what aspects of the programs worked most effectively, what problems had arisen and what were the best ways forward for women's leadership programs.

One of the most unusual programs is the one of which I am National Director: the Australian Technology Network Women's Executive Development Program (ATN WEXDEV). The ATN is a consortium of five leading Australian universities (Curtin University of Technology; Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University; Queensland University of Technology; University of South Australia; University of Technology, Sydney), located in the five mainland states of the Australian continent, which have signed an agreement to operate cooperatively on areas of shared interest. They have combined to run ATN WEXDEV, a strategic career development program designed by and for senior women on the academic and general staff.

ATN WEXDEV has operated since 1996. Until 1998 it was supported by Commonwealth funding to strengthen executive development in higher education; this funding was matched by the five universities. Since 1999 the five universities have taken over responsibility for the program at both national and local levels.

It is interesting that this initiative came from technology universities. It is commonly assumed that they have traditionally masculine leadership cultures, because of their strong links with industry and industry-based funding sources, and reflecting the dominance within their structures of industries in which women are poorly represented, such as engineering, mining, business and information technology. On the other hand, there is limited concrete and systematic evidence of such a bias and indeed, the large-scale mergers that dominated Australian universities in the 1980s incorporated education and nursing faculties, with higher representations of women at senior levels, into all five institutions. The ATN universities demonstrate a shared commitment to valuing diversity and ensuring gender equity. All have strong equity and equal opportunity units and they are rated as leading edge performers by the Commonwealth Affirmative Action Agency. Indeed it is suggested that it is common that such relatively recent institutions may be less bound by tradition.

'Within countries, such as the UK and Australia, where former Polytechnics and Colleges of Advanced/Higher Education have become universities in recent years, these institutions generally seem to have a better record in appointing women, at all levels of the academic hierarchy, than the older research-oriented universities' (CHEMS 1998 p. 22).

The original focus of WEXDEV was women at the senior levels within each institution, Deputy and Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Associate Deans, Heads of Departments and Administrative Units. This involved 125 women from the five Universities. In 1998 the target group for the Program was expanded to provide developmental opportunities for women at the junction of middle and senior management, increasing the target group to over 450 women. The program has also established a separate stream for 60 indigenous women working in the universities, to connect them through an e-mail network and to

enable them to choose those program elements most appropriate to their development. Since the publication of the AVCC Action Plan ATN WEXDEV has been more closely integrated with leadership programs for all women staff in all the universities.

### **Objectives of the Program.**

The structure of the ATN provides a unique and effective context within which to work on the issue of under-representation of women in senior university management. The five universities together provide a near-national network, and, located as they are in five different States, they are able to collaborate without prejudice to their need to be increasingly competitive. Their similar histories and academic profiles ensure some commonality, but they are sufficiently varied in their characteristics as to provide a very wide range of learning opportunities for the program participants. The ATN WEXDEV program consciously attempts to build links between academic and administrative staff through two key strategies. *Cross-institutional collaboration:* The program uses the potential of the network across the Australian continent, using inter-institutional collaboration to break down individual, institutional and geographic isolation.

*Cross-sectoral collaboration:* The strong links that the ATN Universities have established with business, industry, government and community organisations have been targeted to provide different examples of contemporary management and to generate opportunities for senior executive development.

ATN WEXDEV aims to create synergies between individual and organisational benefits so that capability (individual learning needs) and context (intra-institutional issues) are addressed simultaneously. In 1999 the Management Committee affirmed four objectives, with the focus moving from the individual, through the institution, the network and the wider society. The objectives highlight the importance of working collaboratively with other organisations to ensure that the overall objectives are fulfilled.

1. To enhance personal professional development opportunities for senior women to gain appropriate skills and experience for emerging management opportunities.
2. To support the growth of organisational cultures that value diversity and encourage improved representation of women in senior executive positions.
3. To build on the tangible benefits of the collaborative network between ATN universities by providing significant cross-institutional activities for senior women.
4. To strengthen strategic alliances with other organisations, nationally and internationally

The ATN WEXDEV model is not a tightly designed program in which a group of aspiring leaders is recruited and structured and sequenced training provided. It accepts that the senior women to whom it is directed already have significant managerial and personal responsibilities. Hence the program offers flexibility and the opportunity to choose between a number of elements that women can tap into at different times, with different levels of commitment. This has the disadvantage that women do not form a cohesive collegial group. On the other hand it does provide choice and the advantages that can be derived from being part of a wider group.

### **Opportunities Offered by ATN WEXDEV Program**

Some activities have been designed to help improve the culture and environment of universities for women. Others aim to focus on meeting the objectively assessed or personally felt professional development needs of individual women. Yet there is no dichotomy between these aims. The program aims to develop the synergies between the contextual, systemic and cultural issues on the one hand and the professional development needs of individual women. A woman taking part in these activities gains important

management experience and information, developing her individual capacity and confidence, while simultaneously raising the visibility of senior university women. The program also assumes that improving the organisational culture for women requires work with both women and men.

#### *Personal Professional Development*

The program provides, in each university, a range of activities for personal professional development, including skills analysis, workshops and mentoring, in the context of the strategic priorities of the participants' organisations.

#### *Senior Executive Placements*

In these participants undertake a month-long project of benefit to high-performance national or international organisations in business, industry, higher education or the public sector to observe how other organisations deal with current management issues.

#### *Seminars and Workshops*

Each university provides a range of local seminars and meetings in which important professional issues are explored and skills developed. These have included financial management, ethics and committee skills. In addition occasional national seminars are held, designed to provide up-to-date management theory and high-quality training in areas including entrepreneurialism and knowledge management. Seminars and workshops are also designed to strengthen inter-institutional networks as universities can send representatives to other states or to a national conference or workshop.

#### *Networking*

Networking in order to link women within and across institutions is an essential component of the program, to share information and also to set up structured group discussions on subjects of strategic importance. The Program uses both a Home Page (<http://www.uts.edu.au/oth/wexdev>) and an e-mail Discussion List links all participants, providing information on program opportunities, stimulating discussions and canvassing views on the future of the program. Networking is also important on a face to face basis, informal and formal, and the program has increased cross-institutional communication and collaboration.

### **Implementation of the Program.**

ATN WEXDEV is administered by a national Management Committee comprising senior staff from each of the five ATN universities. A National Office has been established, with a part-time Program Director and a part-time Executive Assistant. In the collaborative style of the program, the National Office was based in Melbourne at RMIT from 1996-7 and from mid-1997 to the present in Sydney at UTS.

Each university has nominated an Institutional Contact, working part-time, with responsibility for promoting the program, identifying core participants, building links between the ATN WEXDEV program and other institutional initiatives for their women employees and managing the implementation of ATN WEXDEV within their own institutions. Each university also has a University Implementation Committee, convened by a senior woman, which brings together all areas with a role in gender equity including equal opportunity, staff development and teaching and learning groups. This ongoing contact is important in ensuring that there is coherence and full coverage in the programs provided by these divisions and a joint opportunity to identify areas of difficulty. The program operates on continued contact between the National Office and the university institutional contacts and we are gradually cutting back on the role of National Office so that the program and its cross-institutional links become embedded in each centre.

### **Evaluation of the Program.**

During the three years operation of the ATN WEXDEV program, there have been two evaluations. The first focused particularly on participants' experiences of the program.

Participants indicated that they had enhanced their knowledge and skills on issues of management and leadership, had the opportunity to extend their experience in senior positions and had strengthened their professional networks. The second focused on the success of embedding the program within each institution and expanding to women in middle management and to indigenous women. The program has shown itself to be innovative, flexible and substantial. It has gained committed support from senior university management and high visibility among the women in the target group. Through their involvement women believe they have had the opportunity to influence and encourage diversity in organisational cultures so that they are responsive to the employment patterns and career priorities of all women staff. During 2000 there will be a special focus on seminars such as research development for women academics who have been less likely to be involved in executive development programs than women administrative staff.

Statistically, the ATN universities perform well. The proportion of all academics who are female in ATN is at or above the national average; the proportion of senior academics who are female is higher than the national average and that the ratio is well above national average. We know that the proportion of *all* general staff who are female in ATN is above 50% but below the national average, but that since 1996 the proportion of *senior* general staff who are female has increased significantly more than the national average increase and that there has been a marked increase in the feeder group to senior executive management. In one of the universities over 50% of the senior administrative staff are female. We are cautious however about drawing too many inferences from what are still low numbers in a constantly evolving situation. Nonetheless it is pleasing that by November 2000 two of the five universities will have female vice-chancellors, important role models for other women.

### **Key Characteristics of the Program**

The ATN WEXDEV model of senior executive development for women has an innovative design based on experiencing different and changing environments to gain positive developmental benefits and networking to establish a critical mass of senior women. *Experiencing Different and Changing Environments*

Each element of WEXDEV provides women with opportunities to go outside their institutions and to experience different organisational and management cultures and hence develop a capacity to manage change. This is most clearly exemplified in senior executive placements, a most successful element which are described in a separate presentation at this conference, in which they experience approaches being taken in other sectors to strategic issues that are now challenges for universities. The discussions on the list are designed to encourage positive responses to inevitable changes, so that participants set goals, adjust to circumstances, and bring teams with them.

#### *Building a Critical Mass through Networking*

The importance of networking has become more apparent through the three years of operation of the program. Linking individuals and sharing experiences provides a positive basis on which we can build a critical mass across the institutions. Research suggests that as women rise in the university hierarchy, their peer support falls away and they become isolated from other women. It is also suggested that although women are good at networking, the networks they establish are not as powerful as those of their male colleagues (Rothstein, M. and Davey, L. 1995 pp. 20-25). There is some evidence that women in particular are more likely to use networks to foster relationships, support one another and share concerns about women's disadvantage, rather than to further their careers (Clark, H. Chandler, J. and Barry, J. 1996 p. 9). The focus of ATN WEXDEV on women's professional development and on cultural change within organisations provides a clear encouragement to direct networking activity towards targeted goals. The 1997 evaluation showed that many of the women felt quite isolated in their own university setting and praised the opportunities 'to

network with colleagues in other states and in other areas of university activity' and 'to have access to information, support and advice.'

Ongoing assessment of the e-mail list shows that women given this opportunity respond, often in unexpected ways, but with important consequences. Earlier this year there was an intense discussion of appropriate dress for senior university women. Some derided this; but for others it indicated that not only do some women still feel uneasy in the academic world but also express resistance to the seeming corporatisation of academic workplaces.

Extending the network beyond institutional and sector boundaries has been important in building links with significant other organisations working on women's executive development. WEXDEV has also been successful in gaining a grant from the Australian Government, through its development agency AusAid, administered by the International Development Program, to work with senior women in South African higher education to build a training and support network.

The ATN WEXDEV program demonstrates that networking provides a 'micro-climate' within which the critical mass of women at relevant levels has increased participants' sense of effectiveness and impact both as individuals and as a group. They feel more positive in relation to their personal visibility, importance and voice within the university. Moreover, perceptions of the capacities and capabilities of women have markedly improved. Senior ATN women as a result have an increased awareness of the value they add to their institutions, of the limitations of mono-cultural organisations and of women's potential as change-agents. They recognise their own leadership potential.

This is a significant tribute to the power of conversation and dialogue to effect change. Women's executive development has been established as a priority on the ATN strategic agenda, with the recognition that this is not a *marginal* activity, but one that is vital for the enhancement of the overall management capacity and strategic planning of the ATN universities. Its success is demonstrated by the Vice-Chancellors' commitment of funds to maintain WEXDEV National Office from 1999, combined with a commitment to establish the structural and organisational basis to foster broader collaboration between institutionally-based women's leadership programs within the ATN.

The fact that the ATN is a national network gives the program a further significance, in that it has the potential to affect higher education culture and structures at the sectoral as well as the institutional level. The establishment within the ATN of a critical mass of senior women has had an impact on the higher education sector in Australia and overseas, on the ATN network, on the institutions and on the women themselves.

The Vice-Chancellor of RMIT University pointed out at a recent ATN WEXDEV conference that networks offer a powerful way of achieving critical mass and access to the economies of scale necessary for successful competition, while at the same time maintaining institutions at a manageable size and allowing local responsiveness. 'But networks are a new form of organisation and represent a new way of relating - there are no roadmaps about how to do this' (ATN WEXDEV 1999b, p10). It is often a matter of faith to stress that the network is making a practical difference, since it is not easy to assess patterns of relationship and influence by the narrow quantitative measures now demanded by economic rationalists. But it is our conviction that ATN WEXDEV is in fact making a significant contribution to senior women and their role in higher education leadership.

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