

Women and the 21st century University: some reflections on friendship and collaboration

For Lesley

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It is a great pleasure to be here today and to share this important and exciting event with you all. It is important for many reasons – not least of which is the precious opportunity to pause from our daily routines, to meet with others likeminded, and reflect collectively on our past, our present and our future. It's also exciting for me to enjoy the energy of so many women in a room together!

This presentation has taken me some time to think through – I have sat through many keynotes and I want to do you all, and the topic, justice. While I do want to sound a note of warning about particular signposts around us – I primarily want to offer you all what I call – a reflection back of yourselves – in other words, as a critical friend – I want to speak your strengths as well as your weaknesses. To help me here, I will be drawing on a recent study undertaken at CQU. My presentation will also offer a personal reflection – as someone who joined the University sector from the public sector over 15 years ago – and as someone who did both undergraduate and postgraduate study as a mature aged, full time working, student. I joined CQU in 1994 and have been a Director of a Research Centre as well as now an Associate Dean (Research). I enjoy research in all its forms, but like many of you, I find administration takes up much of my time!

Let me begin with a brief – all too brief- reflection on our past. As an historical sociologist (one of my many hats) I always believe in grounding our present and thinking about our future by reflecting on our past – what Foucault and others call – the history of the present¹. I was tempted to talk to you about the University of the 19th century – where women entered under sufferance; where their effigies were burned by male undergraduates in protest against them being there – where they were initially taught in separate colleges and without being able to take out their degrees.

My great hero – Virginia Woolf – who was denied access to a university despite being much, much brighter than her brothers and was thereby educated at home later in life encouraged women to seize the opportunity of formal education². Her famous book – *A Room of One's Own* – was developed from two lectures to women students at Girton in 1928³. Here on the day she presented the last lecture, she writes about that experience in her diary – a mixture of regret and frustration, I think, in her voice –

¹A good place to start about this fascinating approach would be Munslow, A. (1997) *Deconstructing History*. London: Routledge and Dean, M. (1997) *Critical and Effective Histories. Foucault's Methods and Historical Sociology*. London: Routledge.

²There are any number of books about Woolf, a recent one is Lee, H. (1997) *Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage Books.

³ Woolf, V. (1929/1988) *A Room of One's Own*. London: Grafton Books.

I am back from speaking at Girton ... Starved but valiant young women – that’s my impression. Intelligent, eager, poor; ... I blandly told them to drink wine and have a room of their own. Why should all the splendour, all the luxury of life be lavished on ...[young men] and none on ... [young women]? I fancy sometimes the world changes. I think I see reason spreading. But I should have liked a closer and thicker knowledge of life. I should have liked to deal with real things sometimes. I get a sense of tingling and vitality from an evening’s talk like that: one’s angularities and obscurities are smoothed and lit ⁴.

At the time of her speaking, the University of the early 20th century was still a place largely unfamiliar to women and where women were only tolerated – such women as were there were usually of the upper or middle class. It was not until the 1960s that women entered University life in some numbers – many on scholarships, and it was not until the late 60s and 70s that women were regularly teaching in Universities – not that long ago in terms of mentoring or precedence. But the opportunities that are now available to women as students as well as women as academics, could only be dreamed about by Virginia and her sisters.

What are the traits that have made up the history of our – by that I mean women - present here in the Australian University of the 21st century? So you may say, well, Dawkins – which reminds us that both CSU and CQU were Colleges of Advanced Education before they became Universities in the early 1990s – important histories which fundamentally shaped our future – and which still shape our present – in for example, the many mature aged students we teach and the fact our research profiles are not as strong as other institutions.

Some of you may say – equal pay – which reminds us that opportunities for higher education in Australia opened more broadly to women in the 1960s, when employment other than nursing and teaching were recognized as ‘women’s work’. Hearing ‘equal pay’ may trigger other factors – such as gender equity and affirmative action.

I can hear some of the cynics among you thinking that perhaps it is more relevant today to talk of corporate restructuring and market dynamics as influences on the 21st century University. What has happened to the University as a place of knowledge building and contemplation, you may be asking – it now seems to be much more a business, with corporate goals and acronyms such as ESOS, ISO, QA and triple bottom lines.

While I am not about to advocate such a corporatism, I nevertheless do see this change in the past 20 years as having a significant strength for us as women. An important characteristic of the Australian university of

⁴ Woolf, V. (1953/1978) October 27th, 1928. p. 145. *A Writer’s Diary*. London: Panther Books.

the 21st century is the number of women lecturing staff who have joined academe from industry – this is a crucial component to what I want to argue is part of a package of strengths that women bring to University life. Other crucial strengths include: flexibility and adaptation, ‘thinking beyond the square’, ‘accepting diversity’ and maintaining collaborative friendships. Let me just restate these as they form the framework of my presentation.

- Incorporating ‘industry’ experience
- Adaptation
- Flexibility
- Thinking ‘beyond the square’
- Accepting of diversity
- Maintaining collaborative friendships
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Alongside these powerful strengths – we are still facing barriers. I will discuss these too.

Indulge me for a moment while I reflect on my own experience in tertiary education and how these ‘strengths’ influenced my own path. When I matriculated in the late 1960s – I didn’t do well enough to enter University, and my parents – post WW II migrants - could not afford to send me. I also didn’t do well enough to get a Commonwealth Scholarship – and so went into a bank and overseas and other jobs and from there found my way to the Federal Public Service. In the mid 1970s I was keen to continue my higher education – I can remember going to Flinders University and asking advice how I could enter a Bachelor of Arts program. I was instead told to go to the S.A. Institute of Technology (now UniSA) and do an Associate Diploma, if I passed this successfully, I could perhaps try again. I did this, it took four years, and I did try again, and I began my BA at Flinders in 1980, completing it at the ANU in 1985. No one had discussed honours with me or postgraduate study – so I didn’t realize when I changed Universities, that I would become ineligible for an honours program at ANU. In 1986 I moved to WA and there enrolled in a Masters program at UWA. I was still in the public service, and ambitious, so I thought a Masters of Industrial Relations was my best bet. It didn’t take too long for me to discover that this degree was predicated on an undergraduate economics degree – which I didn’t have. So I changed courses and began a Masters in Women’s Studies. Three years later, my degree nearly completed except for the dissertation – an opportunity to live in Japan presented itself. I asked UWA if I could do the dissertation while overseas. No – they said – no one has ever done that before – we can’t permit it. I transferred the degree as a Master of Social Science to Edith Cowan (as it then had just become) and where I was by then working. ECU did let me undertake the dissertation overseas – but again, no one advised me that I could have sought an upgrade to a PhD program – perhaps I didn’t have the right questions to ask – but then no-

one was actively mentoring me either. On my return to WA and back at Edith Cowan, I was invited to UWA School of Social Work and Social Policy to undertake a PhD program. Entering the hallowed halls of a sandstone without an Honours degree was tough. I was asked by the Dean of Graduate Studies to produce my Masters thesis before a decision would be made. The comment I received back was - why hadn't this body of work been submitted for a PhD? By then I was working in the tertiary sector and was a little more comfortable with these questions. I enrolled in the PhD program at UWA in 1993 - I did the project while working full time, and in the middle (1994) moved from ECU (where they wouldn't give me more than a 12 month contract at a time) to CQU where I was granted tenure in the first year. The year I arrived was very hectic, but I was reassured that I would be able to ask for a semester study leave when I needed to write the thesis up. The following year – that option was no longer available. Instead I did my writing up over Christmas, in breaks and on weekends and graduated in 1998. I am sure many of you have had similar experiences. I ask: does such an experience perhaps affect our view of what it means to be an 'academic'?

I have had an amazing career at CQU – from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer, Director of a Research Centre and now Associate Professor and Associate Dean (Research). I can recall submitting my first ARC (not successful) in 1998 and one of my reviewers questioned my asking for early career status – based on the apparent 'speed' with which my career was operating! When I do have time to reflect – such as now – I think about these past years and am profoundly thankful that I have had the privilege of the experience. However, and it is a big however, these same years have seen major changes in the tertiary sector, and the University of the 21st century is shaping up to be a different animal to that of the late 20th or any time previously and my experiences – and those of many of you here today – are crucially important to what I argue are the collective strengths that women bring to academe.

There are some signposts to these changes. Let me tell you a little about how these are playing themselves out at CQU. We are what has become known as a 'hybrid' University – that is, a proportion of our students are full fee paying, many International, some domestic – and this is beginning to counter weigh the numbers of DEST funded students. A hybrid such as CQU is, according to some, the University of the future. However, CQU, like CSU, is a 'regional' university – a factor which, in the Nelson environment – has suddenly taken on deeper significance⁵. On the other hand, CQU is also well focused on its 'non' regional catchments – we have campuses in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. Our Sydney 'campus' is actually a high rise – previously inhabited by HIH.

⁵ Nelson, B. (2002) *Higher Education at the Crossroads*. DEST. April. and Nelson, B. (2003) *Our Universities. Backing Australia's Future*. DEST. May.

Many of our students never visit Central Queensland. On reflection, this does make being a hybrid a strange animal.

In a recent study undertaken for our Research Committee of Academic Board, my colleague Gayle Jennings and I pondered the question why had fewer academic women been applying for internal and external research grants in the past five years? What did such a decline mean? What were the perceived barriers? What could be done to overturn them? At the time we were undertaking the research – Ann Brooks and Alison Mackinnon published their important book – *Gender and the Restructured University* (2001) in which they reflect on the University of the 21st century – and I take the following reflection on the impact on research from it:

‘Academics with an eye to the changing environment self-censor their research, turning away from inquiry chosen by preference to ‘more institutionally strategic directions’; that is, those where ‘performance’ in attracting funding outweighs possibly more beneficial (but longer term) ‘pure’ research. Who [the authors ask] are turning away from their chosen research interests and becoming more strategic in their research goals? What are the gendered implications of such insights? *Many women are likely to be trapped in the intensifying work climate, which leaves little room for research, and few incentives for new researchers*⁶ (my italics).

We undertook our research in a climate of change – for example, we began with one male PVC Research and Academic and by the time we submitted the report – 12 months later – we were onto our third successive one. We began with only one woman Research Professor – and we still only have one – although not the same one. CQU does have a female VC, and now two out of our five Deans are women – but the ‘senior executive’ is predominantly male. When we began our study our Director (Equity & Diversity) reported to the VC – she now reports to the Director, Personnel (male).

In the decade since its establishment as a University, the growth of undergraduate student numbers at CQU has been exponential. This growth, across campuses, across cultures and across discipline areas, has demanded high energy levels and organizational skills of academic staff. It has also placed staff under pressure, as the ‘tertiary education sector [has been] transformed within a generation from academy to enterprise’⁷. At CQU this has been evident in the expansion into AICs and the transition to on-line delivery. Ironically, our excellence in flexible delivery (40% of our students are in distance mode) is now in the Nelson environment – seen as a negative, as the regional loading is not placed on students not on campus.

⁶ Brooks, A. & Mackinnon, A. (2001) *Gender and the Restructured University*. P.7.

⁷Myton, D. (2001) Sexing the academy. *Campus Review*, 11, 46. 13 & 18. November/December.

In the drive for excellence, the pressure has been on academic staff to maintain their professionalism in teaching, as well as continue to develop their research profile. Additionally, for senior staff (ie Level C and above), there has also been the demand for increased involvement in university governance, as the enterprise becomes more and more complex to manage.

Our report stated that 'the current research enterprise at CQU therefore needs to be seen within its recent historical past, as one that is still establishing itself, has some areas of excellence, others of great potential but limited resources, and one which has, until recently, tended towards the 'elitist' 'high achiever' or 'propagation' model of support'⁸. Read this as 'code' for supporting male academics many of whom have had different [read traditional] life journeys into academe.

Brooks and Mackinnon (2001) identified the gendered nature of research enterprises worldwide as one impact of both the globalisation of education, and the more 'instrumentalist' nature of universities generally. This was confirmed recently in a major report to the European Union that stated that women '... are still under-represented at all levels in scientific research throughout the European Union'⁹. This gendered research enterprise could be summarised as those 'entrepreneurial' areas of research, such as biotech, IT, business management and the techno sciences being still seen as the province of male researchers, while women tended to the arts and humanities, social sciences and nursing.

Gender issues in the context of the corporate university are not solely about women related issues, but about the advocacy of a particular 'corporate masculinist agenda' alien as such to many academic men and women¹⁰.

This is reflected in the types of degrees being undertaken by female students, for example only 1/3 of science PhD graduates are women¹¹. The current demand on higher quality research effort, application for grants (both internal and external) by all academic staff, needs to be seen in the context of the continuing maturity of CQU. Since the restructuring of 1997, change and demands to integrate information technology into teaching practice, have tended to be viewed as being of higher explicit [read economic] value than research. In addition, the current demographic of staff levels at CQU has only 22 per cent of women at Level C compared with national average of around 31 per cent. We

⁸ Stehlik, D. & Jennings, G. (2003) *Academic Women at CQU: Barriers to Research. A Scooping Study*. Report to Research Committee of Academic Board. March. (unpublished) p.3.

⁹ European Commission, Research DG, Women & Science Unit (2002) Getting serious about women in research. *Euroabstracts*, February.

¹⁰ Brooks, cited in Myton, 2001, p.13.

¹¹ Karvelas, 2003, Success of science in selling women short. *The Australian*. 26th February.

could compare this to for example, The University of Canberra, where women are currently at 48 per cent of Level C and there has recently been a highly successful mentoring program undertaken¹².

Given the small pool of available staff, it is not surprising to find that many senior women are involved in CQU governance of some kind – either as Heads of Schools, members of senior committees, heads of discipline areas or program co-ordinators. However despite doing this very well – when it comes to promotion it is research that is the focus. In addition, and very importantly, given the current demographic, it is also not surprising to find many women are enrolled in research higher degrees while working full time as an academic, and also involved in some form of university governance.

I should point out that the research conducted at CQU found that, for many of the women we spoke to, research was something precious and important to them, something they aspired to do, but had little time to do well. These are women who have higher degrees as well as those who do not. Some of them reflected that it was the research that made the ‘real academic’ and thus they always felt ‘left behind’. For others, the paradox of needing to work at coordination of courses, developing new programs, managing multi-campus operations, getting programs on line etc. meant that research was something one did on the weekend, or in ones ‘spare time’. I should point out that our EBA currently states that we spend at least 20% of our workload on research activities – but most women we spoke to just laughed when we pointed this out. It goes without saying then that our report to Academic Board concluded that *‘this ‘massive, crushing workload’ is the principal reason our respondents gave for their non-participation in internal or external grant schemes’* (p.4). I am sure that this brief overview has some resonances with your own study.

Since our report was submitted, I am pleased to say that our Women in Research group has been supported to present a conference at CQU in November this year, as well as to investigate the possibilities of a mentoring program at CQU.

Now, I want to take this important opportunity to focus on our strengths and the important and essential contribution that women have made and are continuing to make to the University of the 21st century. How can we turn the ‘masculinist’ agenda around? How could we operate in an alternative environment?

As a collective, our experience in industry gives us an understanding of academe as an organization – many of us have joined after working in

¹² Hunt, J. (2001) Mentors calling all UC women. *Monitor. The Newspaper of The University of Canberra*. 11, 14. September 18, p.4.

other institutions – and by seeing the University as a complex organization and using our competencies in organising, managing, delegating etc. we are well able to integrate into the life on campus. Such important skills are also crucial to successful research management. However, the barrier that mostly holds us back here is what I talk about being the little voice on our shoulder that says: ‘you are not a real academic – that person over there – that man – he is the real academic’. Or another voice that says: ‘Will someone find me out one day and say – you are a fraud?’ We need to silence or diminish that voice – we need to accept that what we contribute to the organization *is* being an ‘academic’ – that our contribution is as important, if not more so, than those we may hold up to be ‘real’.

Our capacity as a collective to adapt is also one of our great strengths. For example, the integration of information technology into the teaching curriculum and research management has been undertaken with breathtaking speed. In 1992 when I joined ECU email was available, but no one was using it. When I joined CQU in 1994 the whole place was wired and email was the communication of choice. It has its downsides – but my point is that women have always been adaptable and their capacity to integrate this technology into their work is one of our great strengths – one which should not be taken for granted. Regional universities have led the way here and much of the scholarship about information technology as much of this pedagogy is being written by women. Information technology is also liberating many women who are isolated from traditional education bases on the eastern seaboard. This adaptive capacity needs to be celebrated and recognised.

Flexibility and thinking beyond the square are also our fundamental strengths and often, under realised and under celebrated, capacities of women. As a collective, we have had to be flexible and adaptive. As a competency of the new University, it is crucial. The ‘traditional’ mores of ‘old’ Universities are being discarded – the new University will be one which can adapt, can accept the challenge of on going change, and can ‘think beyond the square’. It is often women around the table who have the bright ideas – but all too often — it seems we need others to take them up, to ‘translate’ them and only then they get adopted.

We know how to think flexibly and outside the square – but do we know the best ways to put our ideas forward? Do we always wait for someone else first? Or do we suggest it to someone and hope they pick it up? While I am a great believer in the ‘leading from behind’ model of management – there are times and important opportunities that require forward thinking, critical thinking and strategic thinking. Our voices are often silent – or muted. One of the great opportunities of a day such as this is to enable us to find that voice again and raise it to be heard.

Let's consider our capacity to celebrate diversity. It is a linchpin of the new University. Much is said about it in the Nelson Report. Yet I would suggest that it will be women's voices that challenge the new University to adopt 'true' diversity – and not just tokenism. It's been said many times, if we just wait for legislation or for protocols and policies to change over time – we will still be where we are now in 50 years. As I said earlier, our voices appear to be more muted than they were 30 years ago. Our women's studies programs have been 'mainstreamed' – as a nation perhaps we believe that the battle has been fought and won. As academics we know that this isn't so. We do need to speak out against oppression. Many men – including many thinking men – tend to have a world view that patriarchy is 'normal' – most Universities operate on a patriarchal model of management – even those that have a female VC. Take courage – join together – consult each other – mentor each other – and speak for diversity and equity. When asked, join committees – we need more diversity around the decision-making tables. Those of us who are older – we need to mentor younger women – and take pleasure in their energy and enthusiasm – rather than putting them down.

Finally, something about friendship. My personal view is that the capacity for enduring and important supportive collaborative friendships is a vital strength of women in the University of the 21st century. I am blessed with a number of such collaborative friendships – they emerge between postgraduate students as well as with peers – they appear over time, or suddenly in leadership seminars such as I now share with Gail!

I have dedicated this paper to my wonderful collaborator, Lesley Chenoweth. These friendships sustain us and support us. They enable us to carry on sometimes when the going gets tough. They offer us comfort and the ability to vent to someone whom we trust and who values us. Virginia knew about such friendships – she had several in her lifetime that she valued and cherished – in fact at the time she was presenting her lectures at Girton, she was also celebrating the publication of *Orlando* a novel which was a gift to her friendship with Vita Sackville-West. Such friendships, as recent studies have shown, are good for our health. In fact 'the famed Nurses' Health Study from Harvard medical School found that the more friends women had, the less likely they were to develop physical impairments as they aged, and the more likely they were to be leading a joyful life'.

Consider for a moment your own collaborative friendships. These are the women that will nurture and support you; work alongside you and share the joys and frustrations of academic life with you. Research can be even more joyful when undertaken within the framework of such collaboration. The challenge will be to maintain them and the courage we need is to articulate them as central and not abandon them to the pressures of 'managerialism'. The University of the 21st century can become an

environment where such collaboration is celebrated, where the stresses of every day life are balanced by the trust and reciprocity associated with such friendships. I wish you all well and look forward to sharing this special day with you.

Thank you.