Women and leadership working paper series: Paper no. 7: Gender issues in management education: Redressing the imbalance

Catherine R. Smith
Barbara Vitoria
Edith Cowan University

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Gender Issues in Management Education: Redressing the Imbalance

Catherine R. Smith and Barbara Vitoria

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INTRODUCTION

In 1992 the Federal government appointed an Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills (hereinafter referred to as the Task Force) to review Australia's management and leadership capabilities, and advise on measures to strengthen management practices, in an effort to improve economic performance. An international leadership expert advising the Task Force alleged that 'corporate Australia's Achilles' heel' is its all-male monoculture, whose 'rugby-scum mentality' makes boardroom entry difficult for women, and non-traditional men who do not fit the stereotypically masculine image (Mant, 1994:3). Mant emphasised that, because new ideas result from diversity, Australian management culture needs to embrace a variety of differing perspectives.

The Task Force Report (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995) highlighted the strong inter-relationship between the highly gendered nature of both management education and management practice, whose inherent contradictions represented major impediments to more equitable participation of women in management. Some students are pejoratively influenced by these gendered practices, while others unfairly benefit at others' expense.

A low level of gender diversity awareness amongst lecturers, teachers, trainers, and all those concerned with management development (collectively referred to in this paper as educators), as well as learners, can cause tensions. These may result in embarrassment and discomfort for the individuals affected. Moreover, it can pejoratively influence the assessment of student competence by educators, and evaluation by learners of educators' teaching performance.

The Report concluded that, with increasing numbers of women enrolled in university business programs and working in management positions, teaching and learning experiences in management education should meet the needs and expectations of female, as well as male, students. To encourage business to capitalise on the benefits of gender diversity, as a key lever for improving national competitiveness, educational institutions were urged to review their own role in shaping management cultures and practices. An Australian university therefore
commissioned a research project to explore the influence of gender issues on teaching and learning, as perceived by its postgraduate business students.

**THE GENDERED CULTURE OF MANAGEMENT EDUCATION**

The culture of organisations has consistently been identified as a prime source of attitudes, policies and behaviours that work against more flexible and responsive Organizational outcomes, and result in barriers to women's advancement and contribution to management (Burton & Ryall, 1995; Gherardi, 1995; Hearn, 1994; Morrison, 1992; Sinclair, 1994; Smith & Hutchinson, 1995a).

While much of the focus for cultural change has been at the organisational and individual manager level, there is increasing recognition that providers of management education and training play a significant part in influencing attitudes and practices within enterprises (Fastenau, 1995; Simpson, 1995). Educational institutions therefore have a critical role to play in raising awareness of gender issues, and integrating them into management teaching and curricula.

Women and men appear to have grown up in different cultures (Tannen, 1995:139). Consequently, female and male students entering management programmes are likely to have been socialised differently, resulting in different personal affinities with management study units. The Task Force argued that women are more attuned to 'soft' units such as human resource management, whereas men are more likely to feel comfortable with 'hard' management units such as accounting. Also, because female and male managers may define leadership and management in somewhat different terms (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1995), there may be variation in units they consider important for managerial study.

University management courses have traditionally exhibited a strong masculine ethos (Sinclair 1995). However, due to their unequal power base and associated fear of academic and social penalties, learners may be unlikely to challenge paradigms which reflect sexist attitudes on the part of educators. Moreover, if male students have greater difficulty than females in accepting a woman educator's
authority and credibility (Gallos, 1995), there may be gender differences in the evaluation of female and male educators' teaching competencies.

Despite arguments that theoretical management perspectives should incorporate considerations of diversity (Kanter, 1975, 1977; Marshall 1989; Wilson, 1995), few management textbooks have embraced the issue of gender, and models and principles of management have not changed significantly over the past two decades. Most management books are written by men, using masculine examples, which may serve to render women of marginal importance, or even invisible (Spender & Sarah, 1980). These factors may have a detrimental educational effect on women.

Several writers have highlighted the politics of gender in group settings (Caudron, 1995; Collinson & Hearn, 1995; Linstead, 1995), which may influence participants' levels of confidence. Women tend to employ less assertive behavioural patterns, and consequently may be perceived as generally less powerful in mixed-sex group settings. Linguistic models further influence power (Spender, 1980). Because women and men use language in different ways, it may be more difficult for women - and men with less dominating linguistic styles - to be heard in mixed-sex groups, in turn inhibiting their confidence and contributions (Gilligan, 1982; Spender, 1980; Tannen, 1995).

Australian research for the Task Force discerned within academic curricula a gendered management culture, which can lead to women's contributions and interests being ignored or marginalised (Ashenden, Milligan & Quin, 1995; Smith & Hutchinson, 1995b). The Task Force therefore recommended a major overhaul of university-level management education, whose culture was seen to have serious potential to deter women students from maximising their potential.

While much is known about female 'disadvantage' in learning, less research has explored their 'advantages', or the advantages and disadvantages experienced by 'male' students. It seems to be generally assumed that gender issues are exclusively issues for women. Our research sought to dispel this myth by comparing
female and male students' perceptions and experiences of the relationship between gender and learning.

METHODOLOGY

The research was commissioned in July 1995 and completed in May 1996. A review of the literature relating to gender and management education identified a number of areas in which female and male learners' perceptions and experiences might differ. A questionnaire, designed as an exploratory survey rather than as a test for specific hypotheses, was drawn up and piloted. Its purpose was to identify areas for more detailed qualitative research. Questions predominantly required Likert-scale responses, and also invited open-ended comments.

The questionnaire was mailed in October 1995 to 472 students of management units on full- and part-time PhD, Masters, MBA and Graduate Diploma programs in the business faculty of an Australian university. To preserve anonymity, a form was attached which students could complete and return separately if they were willing to be interviewed in connection with the production of a video on this subject.

A response rate of 18 per cent was achieved (n = 85). Fifty women and thirty-five men replied, whose ages ranged from the early twenties to the middle fifties. The relatively low return rate may have been associated with students' preoccupation with examination preparation, and with the controversial nature of the survey topic. Nevertheless, the returns were largely proportional to the overall student populations on each course surveyed, to full- and part-time, and to female and male student populations within the faculty. Returns from international students, particularly men, were under-represented compared with those from local students. This could be attributable to more traditional gender attitudes in non-Australian cultures, which might limit the perceived relevance of such a questionnaire to students from overseas.

The completed questionnaires were coded for computer entry, with responses to open-ended questions grouped according to similarity. Data analysis using a
statistical package allowed identification of differences in gender responses, as well as proportional comparisons.

QUESTIONNAIRE CONTENT

The sequence and wording of questions were significantly influenced by the sensitivity of the subject, and suspected levels of subconsciousness surrounding many gender-related learning issues. To break down conventions of order, the questionnaire format reversed the common practice of putting the masculine first, and posed questions about female learners and educators before those referring to males.

Students were asked about the influence of the educator's gender on their comfort in classroom discussion, and about personal skill development they might find beneficial to enhance their learning experiences. They were also asked to identify specific behaviour they would like educators to change. Subjects were questioned about student visibility, and their perceptions of female and male educators' skills in moderating class contributions of quieter and more talkative students.

Due to the preponderance of management texts written by men, and because the majority of management lecturers in Australian universities are male (Ashenden et al., 1995), the survey probed student awareness and perceptions of, and emotive reactions to, sex-biased attitudes of educators, and examples and language which refer to one sex. Additional questions explored subjects' perceptions concerning educator receptiveness to female and male perspectives, and its influence on learning experiences. To gain insight into overt as well as covert classroom behaviour, the questionnaire investigated student willingness to challenge sexist behaviour and attitudes on the part of educators and students.

Information was sought concerning students' confidence levels when giving opinions in mixed- and same-sex classroom settings, and about behavioural responses in situations where class participation was blocked by other students. Experience of working in student groups was also explored, to gauge the extent and significance of perceived problems such as gender-based communication
difficulties, and their relevance for team assignments, which are commonly used in management teaching.

To investigate the relationship between gender and political power, the survey explored the prevalence of gender-stereotypical expectations concerning student contributions to group assignments. It also sought information about personal responses to dominating or demeaning behaviour on the part of other students, and actions taken in response to campus encounters with gender-biased language and sexually-offensive material. Following the survey, a video was produced to enhance awareness of gender influences on management learning.¹

RESULTS

Reaction To The Survey

One woman commented the survey should not have encouraged people to look for differences which might not have been noticed previously, while a man reported that the survey appeared to have been designed to create 'a discriminatory stance in favour of women'. Two men questioned its relevance, as follows:

"These topics on gender are just a fashion fad. They don't serve much purpose."

"If students are so sensitive to the issues raised above they should take a course in broadening their attitudes to life."

However, the above comments were certainly not typical of men, and a more representative impression of their general responses may be gathered from one reflective comment:

"The problem that I and my colleagues have is lack of awareness among males of the type of issues to which females are sensitive -

¹ Gender Issues in Management: Capitalising on Awareness of Diversity. Edith Cowan University, 1996.
like some of the issues you raise in this questionnaire. If ... there is a perception of gender bias (and presumably this means male-bias) in education, then educators and students should be made aware of it, not criticised for it.”

In a similar vein, a woman commented that "by educating people in unis [sic] this will decrease the amount of sexism in the work place for the future."

The ordering format of questions, whereby women were referred to first, may have given some men their first insight into women’s experiences of being a linguistic ‘tag-on’, since one asked why the questions relating to men were always second.

**Gender-Inclusive Material And Language**

Over three quarters (77 per cent) of respondents were unaware of the university’s policy on bias-free communication, which encourages gender-inclusive language. However, awareness was much lower among women. Despite this policy having existed for four years, 12 per cent of women and 9 per cent of men had encountered sexually offensive material on campus, although mainly through the Internet. Open-ended responses revealed a range of opinion on this particular policy: one man commented that he did not know of any guidelines and did not particularly care, yet one woman stated:

“I only found out about this [policy] over a year into my course. Wish I’d known sooner, as I’d have known what my rights were and how the university supported them.”

Over two-fifths of respondents (41 per cent of female and 42 per cent of male) reported that examples and language in prescribed texts referred predominantly to the male sex, although one man thought there was a bias in favour of women. Another reflected:

“I had not been conscious of single sex (male) references in texts until only recently when I noticed some texts refer ... to managers as ‘her’.
On reflection, I suppose that is because in the past all such references were to males. As a male, I suppose such a bias did not jar on me, but I can see it would be a problem for females.”

Several comments, mainly from men, suggested that, even though texts and language often referred mainly to one sex, this was not meant to be sexist, and should not be interpreted thus. However, one female respondent pointed out that “when it’s a male perspective, it’s not identified as that; it’s treated as the norm.”

Thirty-nine per cent of women, but only 15 per cent of men, reported that educators frequently used examples or language that excluded their own sex. One reported that “with some male lecturers you are invisible – especially if you are an older woman”, while another stated “this is 1995! When lecturers use examples of one sex, it devalues their message – I can’t take them seriously!” However, one man ascribed his experience of “the promotion of masculinity in the class environment” to the fact that the majority of management lecturers were male.

Credibility was sometimes a problem for women, as acknowledged by a man who felt that “little credence [sic] was given to female input/perspectives.” In a similar vein, one woman stated that “lecturers by instinct assume that women have not had the experience of their male counter-parts”, while another said:

“I would like [male lecturers] to recognise the female experience. Often older women are ignored. I would like more respect for my knowledge and abilities.”

No men reported discomfort within the learning environment when reference to their gender was excluded, but 45 per cent of women had experienced varying degrees of discomfort or exasperation at the exclusion of references to women. One woman lamented, “unfortunately, it is a way of life.” Others felt that such experiences treated women “as second-class citizens”, when they were “regarded as [the] weaker sex, physically and mentally, as well as lower in IQ.”
Gender Bias Of Educators And Fellow Students

Eighteen per cent of females and 17 per cent of males had experienced sexist attitudes amongst female educators. Although 36 per cent of women respondents had frequently experienced sexist attitudes amongst male educators, only 9 per cent of men had ever encountered these. Several women referred to the use of joking as a means of communicating sex-biased attitudes, as illustrated by the following reference to sexist and racist comments made by a male educator:

"The problem is this came across as a joke and you were left thinking that if everybody else laughed maybe you lacked a sense of humour."

Almost a third (30 per cent) of women but only 11 per cent of men had openly contested educators' sex-biased attitudes, and male educators were more likely to be challenged than females. However, the vast majority (89 per cent) of all respondents reported that they had never challenged educators' prejudices. Fear of academic penalty was the most common reason for learners' reluctance to challenge sexism, as indicated by the following comments by men:

"Who wants to fail due to having spoken out?"

"You can never win by offending your lecturer."

In fellow learners, sex-biased attitudes were more frequently perceived to be shown by males: 24 per cent of women and 33 per cent of men reported that female learners had displayed sex-biased attitudes, while 46 per cent of women and 32 per cent of men had experienced sexism by male learners. Open answers reported that male learners often communicated sex-biased attitudes in a 'joking' manner. Women were more likely than men to challenge sexist attitudes of fellow learners, whether female or male, but women were particularly likely to challenge male learners. Open-ended responses revealed perceptions that male 'and' female students from Asian countries held more traditional gender-stereotyped views, which were construed by one respondent as "almost 'old fashioned' behaviour."
In class discussions, when defending their ideas against criticism from students of the opposite sex, women were marginally less confident than men, but felt denied contributions more often than men. In such a situation, 19 per cent of women and 27 per cent of men said they would do nothing. In response to students' dominating or demeaning behaviour, women were more likely to ignore this or comment cautiously, whereas men were more likely to use assertive language and body signals.

On the question of student discussions concerning team assignments, both female and male respondents reported higher levels of confidence when contributing in same-sex groups. This was particularly pronounced amongst women. No men reported feeling 'not very confident' in either type of group, although one noted that in mixed groups he felt he "must be careful not to offend ladies or be to [sic] dominant."

Similar proportions of respondents (37 per cent of females and 35 per cent of males) reported that they would welcome additional skills training to increase their effectiveness in student groups. The majority of female respondents and of male respondents primarily identified the need to foster better group selection and management. The second highest skill need for women was public speaking, and for men interpersonal training. To capitalise on classroom participation, equal proportions (27 per cent) of both female and male students said they would welcome training: women ranked assertiveness as most important, while men ranked assertiveness, public speaking, and interpersonal skills as equally important.

Perceptions Of Learning Advantage And Disadvantage

Women were more likely than men to perceive disadvantage in classroom learning experience as gender-related, and 30 per cent thought their learning experience had been disadvantaged as a result of their gender, compared with only 6 per cent of men. A third (33 per cent) of women and 22 per cent of men reported that factors other than gender were more important. Several men reported that they
were not particularly disadvantaged, although one thought men could be unprepared to tow [sic] pro-female line in classes taken by female educators.

Almost a third of respondents (30 per cent of females and 32 per cent of males) reported that women were disadvantaged as students because they were perceived to have less social power than men. Several women, especially those aged 35-45, noted that they were taken less seriously than men, or that their contributions were discounted or trivialised in favour of their male counterparts. Of female respondents, 46 per cent reported that men’s power arose from their more visible and dominant behaviour, but only 24 per cent of men concurred with this view. One woman stated that men’s “louder voices and more boisterous behaviour ensures they are heard”, a view echoed by a respondent who described his experience of classes being “dominated by male students, with few opportunities given/invited for women to comment”.

Several respondents, both female and male, identified ‘mateship’ in classes taken by male educators as a particular advantage for men and disadvantage for women. One referred to her learning experience in one such class:

“...he knew all the male students’ names and spoke to them in lectures but rarely knew a female student’s name, apart from a young woman he saw at a social function. He basically ignored the rest of the women, and women’s questions appeared to be treated as more trivial.”

Twenty-nine per cent of women and 6 per cent of men reported that women were advantaged by having a wider perspective than men, which enhanced awareness of multiple issues. The following comments illustrate this view, and the resultant disadvantages for men:

“[Women are] very perceptive, see and sense more of the management problems and opportunities than men.”
"[Women] listen, they notice, they share information."

"[Men] only recognise half the world. Most tend to be unaware of female experience."

"Some [men] can't see the 'big picture'."

A quarter (25 per cent) of men, but only 4 per cent of women, believed that female students were advantaged by educator favouritism, although one woman reported that "cleavage still gets you attention from some male lecturers."

**Rating Of Management Units And Educators**

There was no gender difference in respondents' rankings of the most important educational unit for managers, and the most enjoyable one, with a unit covering human resource issues rated first on both counts. Nor was there any gender difference in competence ratings of male educators, although 25 per cent of women reported that males should be more cognisant of gender issues. Women and men rated female educators more highly than their male counterparts in terms of ability to encourage quieter students to contribute. Compared with males, female respondents more frequently rated female educators as 'outstanding', citing reasons of professionalism and good preparation. By contrast, men more frequently rated female educators as 'fair' or 'poor', the most common reason being wandering from the subject.

While not all criticisms of educators' teaching performance were gender-related, it was evident that students, in varying degrees, rated performance according to the extent educators met their own gender expectations. Changes in behaviour female students wanted male educators to make included "fewer remarks/jokes' about sexism", and

"generalised acceptance of the female perspective and the value of female points of view and less aggressive approaches to problem solving."
Behavioural changes male students wanted female educators to make included 'becoming less feministic', and dealing with issues 'without being side-tracked so often on the gender issue.'

All respondents found it easier to contribute to class discussions when the educator was of their own sex, and more women than men reported that educators had blocked their class contributions. No men reported that making class contributions was 'not very easy', but 9 per cent of females reported this. Women perceived a greater classroom receptiveness to male viewpoints: 93 per cent of female and 83 per cent of male respondents reported that educators were receptive to male perspectives, compared with 77 per cent of female and 89 per cent of male respondents who reported that educators were receptive to discussion of female perspectives. Open-ended responses from several women revealed that female viewpoints elicited "groans from the audience as we 'push our barrows!'", or were seen as "arty or silly, or a bit of a giggle." Another stated that men "do not appear to appreciate the effect of the male dominated management circles on females."

Yet 82 per cent of female and 54 per cent of male respondents reported that educators’ inclusion of both gender perspectives would have a positive influence on their learning. However, their significantly higher scores at the 'very positive' level show that women perceived this to be much more important for their learning than did men.

DISCUSSION

The results of this exploratory survey lend some support to recent research findings (Ashenden et al., Gallos, 1995; Sinclair, 1995) that a masculine bias exists in management education. They show that gender bias appears to disadvantage female and male students in different ways. Because a large proportion of learners are unaware of relevant guidelines for gender-inclusive language and communication, they do not know about their rights and responsibilities surrounding bias-free communication practices. This may particularly disadvantage female learners because they are more frequently marginalised through gender-
exclusive language, and their experience appears to be more likely to be devalued or ignored.

Female students perceive they bear the brunt of discrimination as a result of sex-biased attitudes and language on the part of male management educators. Older women appear to feel particularly disadvantaged as a result of ageism coupled with sexism. This is of concern, given substantial legislative attempts in Australia over the past two decades to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of sex, ethnic origin, age, and other personal characteristics. Whether conscious or subconscious, sex and age bias can result in direct disadvantage to the learning of women, and indirect disadvantage to men who miss out on hearing and learning about different insights and experiences. This is particularly relevant in Australia, which has an ageing workforce in which women are expected to constitute half by the year 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1988).

The male ethos which still appears to prevail within management programs may explain perceptions of educators' greater receptiveness to discussion from male perspectives. This apparent prejudice, whereby difference from the dominant group tends to become marginalised, can lead to trivialisation of women's viewpoints, effectively rendering women invisible. The Australian Government Style Manual (1994), considers language discriminatory when it makes people invisible; excludes people or highlights only one characteristic to the exclusion of others; stereotypes people; treats people asymmetrically; or denigrates or insults people.

Language plays a vital role in shaping our assumptions and perceptions. While on the surface language may look objective and unbiased, closer examination reveals that this is not necessarily the case. Much of our language, both written and spoken, refers only to the masculine gender. For example, in many books and everyday language, 'he' and 'his' are used on the assumption that single-sex pronouns incorporate female experience. However, research shows that this is not the case, and that women readers and listeners cannot envisage themselves when language excludes female pronouns and examples (Spender, 1980; Butler & Paisley, 1980). Therefore, until management textbooks and educators universally incorporate language, perspectives and examples that include both sexes, it is
likely that gender-related issues will negatively affect the learning experiences of management students, with women feeling that they are more disadvantaged than men.

Paradoxically, any discussion of diversity issues, particularly when stimulated by women educators to redress earlier imbalance in the management curriculum, is frequently perceived as an 'over-emphasis' on the female perspective, as confirmed by the following comment:

"Female lecturers who are interested in equality and incorporate female issues into management classes are seen as pushing only one side (the female side) or tiresome. Many negative responses are made by male students who tire very quickly of feminine issues and perspectives."

Consequently, women educators may be perceived as unwilling to explore male perspectives, which can lead to their being accused of discrimination against men. Given the traditional emphasis of the management education environment, discussion of gender issues may be unfamiliar - and perhaps uncomfortable - territory for learners, both female and male, as confirmed by one respondent's comment that "there are male students who feel threatened by discussions of EEO and related matters." Due to the preponderance of male management educators in Australian universities, issues surrounding sexuality may go some way towards explaining why a quarter of men believed that female students were advantaged by educator favouritism.

Although women learners appear much more likely than men to challenge educators' attitudes which are perceived to be sex-biased, they still report feeling a high level of discomfort when their gender perspective is excluded. This may happen more frequently in classes with male educators. If women ignore this exclusion or make only cautious comments to communicate their discomfort, then because male educators tend to be socialised more readily to perceive direct, explicit messages, communication signals from women are likely to be minimised or missed. It is interesting that men appear to feel no discomfort when educators
use language or examples that exclude their sex. One plausible explanation is that, if the male ethos in management programs is as pervasive as the literature suggests, men feel relatively unthreatened by the rare occasions on which their gender is excluded.

While some men recognise that their classroom behaviour tends to be more visible and dominant than that of females, women are more acutely aware that this can be an educational disadvantage for females. If educators appear to be limited in their ability or willingness to encourage quieter students to participate in classroom discussion and discourage more vocal ones, training in effective teaching methods and student involvement appears to be warranted.

The finding that all students, but particularly women, feel more confident giving opinions in same-sex student groups, comes as no surprise. If, as the literature suggests, women and men grow up in different cultural environments, we are inevitably more knowledgeable about, and therefore more adept in, handling issues which are presented in familiar gender terms, as in same-sex groups. Discussion thus becomes simpler when shared ways of viewing reality and common ground-rules for communication already exist. Conversely, where cultural cues are not shared or understood to the same extent, such as in mixed-sex groups, one would expect lower levels of confidence, despite signs that men are becoming more aware of needing to modify their behaviour to accommodate women's sensitivities. The finding that women's confidence levels vary significantly from those of men, suggests that women perceive themselves in mixed-sex groups as less powerful than their male counterparts to influence consideration of female cultural perspectives.

The evidence revealed by this research in connection with student responses to dominating or demeaning behaviour by students, illustrates the cross-cultural aspect of gender communication. It also supports the extensive literature on women and men's different communication styles, indicating that women tend to be less direct and more cautious in conveying disapproval of behaviour, while men tend to be more assertive.
While there may be little new in this finding, it does have important consequences for both classroom interaction and processes in learner groups. For example, the strong masculine ethos which appears to underpin the management teaching context is likely to make it more difficult to perceive and comprehend forms of communication that differ from the masculine, direct approach. This disadvantages female ‘and’ male learners who do not have this particular, narrower style of communicating. Like any other cross-cultural situation, increased awareness of the communication styles of the other party is essential for understanding and more accurately interpreting cultural cues different from one’s own.

The finding that both men and women perceive it easier to contribute to class discussions when the lecturer is the same sex as themselves, is consistent with other findings in this survey suggesting students are more confident when the communication ground-rules favour their own gendered style of communication. However, men are likely to be advantaged in this respect as the majority of university educators on Australian management programs are male. This could also explain why women are more likely than men to perceive that their contributions to class discussions are blocked by educators. Their more vocal linguistic style further tends to afford men greater ‘space’ in classroom discussions, in turn rendering women less visible, as confirmed by this survey.

That students evaluate educators’ behaviour in gender-centric ways is not particularly surprising. However, while criticisms made by male students appear not to affect their generally positive evaluation of female educators (when compared with their ratings of male educators), this is apparently not the case for female students evaluating male educators.

The use of inverted commas for the word ‘joke’ in several comments raises an issue which may help explain women’s lower regard for the behaviour of male educators. The use of humour in this way seeks to gain group support for the message: those who laugh are in the group, those who do not are outside. Such use of ‘jokes’ by an educator, who has power over students, makes it very difficult for students to question sexist comments, because it effectively denies the remark.
serious discussion. However, the political nature of this tactic is not lost on students, whose use of inverted commas for the word ‘joke’ clearly indicates that this is not just a joke in the usual sense, but a comment containing a sexist message. This may help to explain why a quarter of women felt that male educators need more awareness of how gender issues affect female students. In view of these experiences, it is perhaps not surprising that women commented on the narrower perceptual range of male students.

The wide discrepancy between female and male students’ perceptions of sex-biased attitudes shown by male educators can probably be attributed to the greater access to power that men generally hold in the university environment, by virtue of their numbers and seniority. This situation is likely to persist until more women academics are employed in management teaching and promoted to senior positions. Until such time, female students are more likely than males to feel they are on the receiving end of negative sex bias.

Female students could, therefore, be expected to challenge sexist attitudes of educators far more frequently than male students, as borne out by the findings. However, this situation leaves female students, who have the most to lose, in a precarious position: they are disadvantaged if they do speak out, and disadvantaged if they do not. The political use of humour to express disapproval might be an appropriate strategy for dealing with sexist attitudes, although greater intelligence, creativity and courage are probably required when using this tactic from a less powerful, female vantage point. These resources may be stretched to the limit if female students have regularly to cope with inappropriate behaviour of male educators, such as that described by one student, involving comments about women students’ legs, clothes and prettiness. This constitutes demeaning behaviour in the academic context.

Confirmation that women particularly value gender-inclusive perspectives in their learning experience is not surprising, since they perceive themselves to be more excluded in this respect. However, the significant number of positive responses by men, indicating that they also value such an approach, is more interesting. Although it cannot be discounted that some may have deliberately given ‘politically
correct' or socially acceptable responses, it is also possible that these views are related to heightened sensitivity to being male, or to increasing awareness of the additional learning benefits that accompany the inclusion of female viewpoints.

The survey tentatively confirms observations within much contemporary management literature, including the Task Force Report, that women bring particular skills to managerial situations and group management. The ways in which students report themselves to be disadvantaged in their learning experience were often mirror opposites of the other sex: for example, male students have narrower perspectives because female students do not assert their viewpoints often or vigorously enough; female students are better listeners because male students are more vocal. Clearly, both female and male students appear to be disadvantaged by not being more balanced in the skills they possess and exercise. Moreover, the interpersonal skills identified by male survey respondents to help enhance their learning effectiveness are the very skills at which women have been increasingly acknowledged as being more adept.

This survey did not support the view that women and men tend to have different affinities with management subjects, because the 'soft' unit relating to people management was nominated first by the majority of women 'and' men as not only the most important unit for managers but also the most enjoyable. This is heartening, in view of the contemporary emphasis on the importance of interpersonal skills for effective management, despite the pejorative use commonly associated with the label 'soft' (Report of the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While these findings are based on a relatively small number of responses, they allow some tentative observations about postgraduate students' perceptions of learning experiences in management education. The results also have important implications for management education more generally, and suggest that further research in the area of gender issues would be valuable.
The overall conclusion to emerge from the research is that what often causes some concern to male learners, give much greater concern to females. It appears that the gender paradigms of male educators and female learners are significantly more out of touch with one another than educator paradigms encountered by male learners. This results in females being more disadvantaged than males in their learning experience. Gender issues therefore cannot be seen as 'just a fashion fad', because learning experiences influence the preparedness and ability of future managers to recognise and capitalise on the full range of talents available in the workforce.

Educators should be aware of the need to achieve greater balance in the managerial skills possessed and exercised by both women and men, and have the commitment and abilities to influence learners to this end. This obviously requires educator training, but training for learners would also be valuable in developing competencies such as interpersonal skills and assertiveness. Workshops for learners could usefully explore the gender dynamics and possible tensions associated with team work, and encourage a better balance of listening and talking.

When the educator is of their own sex, learners are more confident in offering class opinions, and also tend to evaluate lecturers more positively. This is because perceptions tend to be based on their own gender 'ground rules'. These findings are relevant for recruitment and teaching allocation for management education, if there is to be a better balance of female and male educators on management programs. Moreover, the development of educator skills to influence class participation, can ultimately encourage more reticent or less vocal learners, whether female or male, to get a fairer share of 'air space'. This is vital when assessment of learners includes an evaluation of their class participation.

Educators must bear some responsibility for significant discomfort on the part of some female learners, when they use language or examples that exclude the female sex. The consequent exasperation distracts female students' energy from the learning task, which therefore places a greater burden on them, and disadvantages their learning. To counter this problem, providers of management education need
to make educators aware of the significance of gender-inclusive language, train them in the skills required to effect this, and monitor the policy by regularly surveying learners in this regard. Gender-inclusive communication and teaching texts not only create a more equitable and effective learning experience for women, but may also have a positive effect on learning experiences of men, through exposure to different perspectives. This may also improve the learning experiences of educators themselves.

The perceived prevalence of sex-biased attitudes amongst educators also suggests a need to keep them fully cognisant of relevant guidelines for promoting unbiased communications, since gender-stereotyped attitudes can limit the development of talent amongst all but the most aware and socially adept learners. Universities and other providers of management education could also usefully consider including cross-gender communication as an element of training programs for developing effective group skills in both educators and learners, to improve interpretation of differing cultural cues. Ideally, such programs would be mandatory supports for teaching practice, rather than optional extras.

Learners can play a useful role in making educators aware of sex-biased attitudes, but are often deterred from doing so through fear of being penalised academically and socially. Providers of management education could, by means of adequate training, assist educators to deal with learner challenges in a more open way, and institute mechanisms to protect learners who have legitimate complaints about sexist behaviour by educators.

However, the low awareness of relevant guidelines for gender-inclusive language and communication suggests a need for continual monitoring of the effectiveness of transmitting such policies to learners, if equitable educational experiences are to be available for all. This is especially important for classroom and learner group interaction at a time when Australian universities are enrolling increasing numbers of international students, some of whom may hold more traditional attitudes towards the role of women in management, which may conflict with contemporary Australian mores.
Because learners are generally more confident giving opinions in same-sex groups, single-sex situations might be more appropriate when learning requires a free exchange of opinions, such as at the problem-formulation stage of group work, or during brainstorming sessions. This might allow a wider range of viewpoints than discourse afforded by mixed-sex groups. Such an exercise could then be followed by mixed group discussion to share and explore all ideas generated.

Without deliberate changes to management education, which raise awareness of the significance of gender issues, the status quo is likely to continue, with all its inherent disadvantages. Instead, however, considerations of equity and common-sense demand a learning environment in which the contributions and talents of women and non-traditional men are invited, welcomed and cultivated.

Enhanced awareness of gender issues in management education can foster better relations between educators and learners, and perhaps also improve understanding between educators associated with management learning. Indirect longer-term benefits are also possible, through better preparation of future managers to capitalise on workforce diversity, resulting in improved career outcomes for women in management and a more competitive Australia.

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