

Building sector capacity: Maximising the contribution of mentoring programs to achieving a more gender equitable sector

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Introduction

This paper builds on the *Mentoring Program for Senior Women* paper (Bell 2009) and subsequent program in order to suggest a complementary next step for UAEW to pursue. UAEW, in conjunction with the LH Martin Institute is well placed to take on a leadership role to build sector capacity in best practice delivery of women only mentoring programs. This would serve the dual purpose of maximising the effectiveness of sector wide efforts to improve the situation of women, thus ultimately supporting the work of UAEW, while building the profile of UAEW through reaching a wider audience.

Rationale

The rationale for a sector capacity building approach is argued by addressing the following main points:

- The imperative for improving the status, success and contribution of women within higher education remains strong. This is particularly true for senior women, but is also the case for women at lower levels who constitute feeder groups for future leadership.
- The popularity of mentoring continues to increase both in women only (WO) targeted programs and in all other facets of university life. The continued prevalence of WO mentoring as a gender equity strategy suggests that it is a worthwhile investment to ensure research informed practice.
- There is a growing critical strand within the mentoring literature that queries the efficacy of formal and informal mentoring for women. Formal mentoring programs may not be delivering the hoped for outcomes for women, and they risk losing their original equity intent. At the same time significant progress is being made in understanding how this occurs and can be addressed in formal programs. It is critical that this research is translated into practice.
- This research into practice approach can be facilitated through the provision of well-targeted workshops and resources.

The paper concludes by canvassing material that can guide the development of the workshop. This includes innovations in practice, together with questions that are proposed, on the basis of the literature, as useful in guiding mentor program design and practice.

Women in Higher Education

The difficulties that women face within the sector continue to be well documented, and have been outlined in the companion mentoring document (Bell 2009) and the 2010 Gender Equity Framework document (Bell 2010) available on the LH Martin Institute mentoring page.

It is now understood that women experience cumulative disadvantage over the period of their careers, while men could be said to experience cumulative advantage. Eagly and Carli (2007) use the metaphor of the labyrinth to describe women's career paths. There is no one defining 'glass ceiling' moment, rather it is 'the sum of many obstacles along the way' (Eagly & Carli 2007:63). If the labyrinth aptly describes women's experience, then it follows that some external assistance in recognising and negotiating the twists, turns and dead ends of the labyrinth would be invaluable. Surely a mentor would be advantageous in negotiating the labyrinth? This connection, between careers and mentoring, is increasingly evident in the research on women in the academy.

Women's disadvantage is clearly demonstrated in the work of Dever et al. (2008) in their exploration of the influence of PhD experience on post PhD employment. When reporting on their supervisory experience:

...female graduates reported significantly less encouragement than males in those areas relevant to building academic careers...In general, assistance in gaining employment was significantly more likely to be available to male rather than female PhD candidates' (Dever et al. 2008:ii).

This translated into lower status and pay employment outcomes for female PhD graduates. The clear link between mentoring, networking and employment outcomes, led Dever et al (2008:iii) to conclude that '[T]hese results testify to the importance of social relationships and academic and professional connections in securing good employment outcomes.' This important finding demonstrates that disadvantage for junior women is not located in the past. The clear link between less advantageous academic employment outcomes and the absence of mentoring demonstrates how the pattern of the career labyrinth begins early in women's careers. It also points towards improved mentoring as a potential solution to address disadvantage. It not surprising that mentoring continues to be embraced as a popular solution to combat the difficulties that women experience in building academic careers.

Mentoring Practices in Australian Higher Education

There is a rich tradition of women only (WO) targeted programs within Australian universities. Programs date back to the early 1990s when Federal funding was available and these programs flourished¹. Not all survived the withdrawal of external funding, however over the years the majority of universities, at any one time have offered programs for women².

In 1998 a practitioners' network (convened by UWA) was formed following the *Winds of Change* conference roundtable facilitated by Colleen Chesterman (co-ordinator of the ATN WEXDEV program). The practitioners' network, labelled sdfw³ (staff development for women) remains active, meeting biannually in conjunction with the EOPHEA (equity practitioners) conference. There is a substantial but not complete overlap between sdfw practitioners and equity practitioners, with a number of WO initiatives being located in staff development or research development units within universities.

In the most recent survey of WO targeted programs, Tessens (2008) found 31 out of 36 universities had one or more WO targeted programs, and 17 of these had WO mentoring programs. A review of the published and grey literature⁴ compiled at the same time unearthed more than 90 documents, covering the 15 year history of WO programs within Australian higher education at that time. The literature shows a broad engagement with mentoring, including 'how to' documents (Butorac 1998; Chesterman 2001) and the adoption of a number of approaches including; mentoring as one component of a leadership development program (de Vries 2005; de Vries, Webb & Eveline 2006; Webb 2008), programs targeted at early career researchers (Casson & Devos 2003; Anita Devos, McLean & O'Hara 2003; Gardiner 2005; Gardiner et al. 2007), group mentoring (McCormack & West 2006; McCormack 2006; West & McCormack 2003), mentoring across a network (Chesterman 2003) and collegial/peer mentoring (Pike 1995). There is a bias towards mentoring programs for academic women, however a number of programs are inclusive of all female staff.

Devos (2005) and de Vries (2010), both practitioners who have subsequently focussed on mentoring in Australian HE in their doctoral theses, have brought a more critical stance that is included below.

Complicating Mentoring

The efficacy of mentoring for women

A recent Harvard Business Review article (Ibarra, Carter & Silva 2010) with its catchy title of "*Why men still get more promotions than women*" grabbed the attention of many. Based on a large-scale survey conducted by Catalyst and in-depth interviews of a smaller sample of men and women, the central finding of their research, that in fact women gain less career benefit from both formal and informal mentoring than men do, does not come

¹ Further details regarding the early years of WO programs in Australia are outlined in Eveline, J 2004, *Ivory Basement Leadership: Power and invisibility in the changing university*, UWA Press, Crawley.

² Surveys were undertaken by the AVCC in 2001 and 2003.

³ <http://www.osds.uwa.edu.au/programmes/ldw/sdfw>

⁴ http://www.osds.uwa.edu.au/programmes/ldw/sdfw/literature_review

as a surprise to those familiar with the critical literature on mentoring (Giscombe 2007; McKeen & Bujaki 2007). Nevertheless it strikes at the heart of our hope, as expressed by Eleanor Ramsay that formal mentoring would replicate for women 'the informal systems for career advancement used for so long and to such good advantage by male colleagues' (Ramsay 2001:16).

Formal mentoring was originally designed to address the shortfall experienced by women in the workplace, where informal mentoring was observed to advantage men in a process of homosocial reproduction. Then how can formal mentoring programs, our attempts to replicate for women and other minority groups the career advantages of informal mentoring, be advantaging men more than women?

Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010:82) discovered that:

All mentoring is not created equal...There is a special kind of relationship – called sponsorship – in which the mentor goes beyond giving feedback and advice and uses his or her influence with senior executives to advocate for the mentee.

Sponsorship, they found was more readily extended to male than female mentees. Mentors, predominantly male helped women to understand 'ways they might need to change as they move up the leadership pipeline' while helping men to 'plan their moves and take charge in new roles, in addition to endorsing their authority publicly'. In contrast, some women described 'how they've had to fight with their mentors to be viewed as ready for the next role' (Ibarra, Carter & Silva 2010:83).

This research underlines the way in which gendered assumptions and stereotypes play out within the mentoring dyad. While Ibarra et al. propose that increased clarity and accountability regarding the sponsors (rather than mentors) role will address this problem, there is still something missing. If these senior sponsors/mentors (predominantly male), have been unable to bring greater numbers of women into the senior levels of the organisation in their roles as leaders and line managers, why would adopting the role of mentor/sponsor change this?

Ibarra, Carter and Silva's article provides a useful jumping off place to consider some of the complications that arise for women only mentoring programs. Not only does gender intrude into the mentoring relationship, undermining the hoped for outcomes for women, but gendered advantage is being reproduced despite gender equity strategies being introduced to counter this. This raises important questions about the effectiveness of equity strategies such as women only mentoring programs and the possibility that they may be misdirected or co-opted.

The focus on women

Perhaps the most enduring criticism of mentoring programs comes from gender and organisation scholars who consider 'women centred' approaches to gender equity to be misdirected. Their criticism is that women only programs focus on 'fixing the women' to better fit the gendered status quo without addressing the need for organizational cultures and practices to be transformed (Meyerson & Kolb 2000). Approaches that focus on the women *without* addressing organizational cultures that reproduce inequality are therefore fundamentally flawed. As Gherardi and Poggio (2001:246) note '[E]qual opportunities programs are bound to fail if they are implemented in organizational cultures that reproduce a dichotomous symbolic order of gender keeping women to 'their place''.

McKeen and Bujaki (2007:218) concluded in their recent review of gender and mentoring that mentoring 'seems intended to assimilate women into the dominant masculine corporate culture'. Meanwhile, informal mentoring and networking, which are shaped by masculinity and reinforce male advantage, remain in place and unscrutinised, as do the usual ways of progressing through organisational hierarchies. Because it does not address entrenched relations of male advantage and female disadvantage, formal mentoring fails to challenge the status quo (Hackney & Bock 2000). Perhaps, as Devos, McLean and O'Hara (2003:146) suggest, it is because they fail to challenge to the status quo, that 'such programmes are paradoxically the most palatable [to the organisation] forms of positive or affirmative action for women'.

Anita Devos (2008:195) takes this a step further, applying a post structural feminist critique to mentoring of Australian academic women, arguing that 'these programmes are supported because they speak to institutional concerns with improving performance in a performance culture, while being seen to deal with the problem of gender inequity'. Devos suggests that mentoring suits the purposes of the institution precisely because it 'activates the operation of technologies of self, which the women...take up to manage themselves as women

academic workers'. Mentoring therefore produces 'certain sorts of self-regulating subjects' (Devos 2005:194). Devos (2008:195) concludes that 'this reading locates mentoring within a network of institutional power relations, in so doing upsetting the truths we hold about mentoring as always good and unproblematic'.

In order to address these criticisms it is imperative that women only mentoring programs engage with the context of the program, be that institutional or sector-wide, and the need for culture change. De Vries (2010) argues that programs require a 'bifocal approach'. Using the analogy of bifocal spectacles that allow wearers to switch focal length easily between near and distant vision, she suggests that programs can maintain a focus on the developmental needs of the women and a focus on the need for organisational change, and that these can be seen as complementary goals. Mentoring is ideally suited to this end because it engages with the women and with senior organisational members as mentors within the program. Mentors, with their larger sphere of influence can be seen as key players and partners in the required organisational change process. Mentoring can provide the opportunity *and* be the vehicle for developing or enhancing the gender insight of mentors. The 'bifocal approach' to mentoring programs therefore places much greater emphasis on the mentor and the mentoring relationship. This is unusual in the mentoring literature which focuses almost exclusively on the mentee and mentee outcomes (Allen 2007).

The need to focus on the mentor and the mentoring relationship is well illustrated in the Ibarra et al. work. In order to address their findings, they advocate training sponsors on the complexities of gender and leadership. This is an important recognition of the need to scrutinise the role of the mentor and what they bring to the mentoring relationship, in particular their (lack of) gender insight. While advocating gender training for mentors is critical, the relationship between mentor and mentee offers another avenue for the development of gender insight on the part of mentor and mentee (de Vries 2010). Mentoring has the capacity to be developmental for both partners.

Defining mentoring

The mentoring literature has moved towards differentiating between approaches to mentoring, recognising that this has important implications, as observed in the Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010) article. Are we talking about 'well meaning colleagues' who provide 'caring and altruistic advice' or highflying 'career sponsors' to ensure the next promotion?

Ragins and Verbos (2007) suggest that there is a gendered dimension to how we think about mentoring. They argue that instrumental (career focussed) mentoring, or what they refer to as the 'Godfather approach', values mentoring for

...what it can do rather than for what it can be...this view ignores the reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships, and takes a hierarchical and perhaps stereotypically masculine approach to the relationship (Ragins & Verbos 2007:95, original emphasis).

Ragins and Verbos (2007:92) seek to reclaim what they describe as a more feminine, relational view of mentoring involving 'mutual growth, learning and development'. 'Relational mentoring' overcomes the limitations of one-directional, hierarchical mentoring and calls attention to the ways that traditional perspectives based on informal mentoring are themselves gendered. It is therefore reasonable to assume, as Fletcher and Ragins (2007:390) observe, 'that traditional perspectives on mentoring may not fit the needs, experiences, or role expectations of women...'

Rather than thinking of mentoring as either instrumental, career focussed and advice giving *or* relational, two-way and developmental, seeing them as two ends of a spectrum or continuum is more helpful in terms of understanding what happens in practice. Mentors are rarely situated at the extremes and often use a mix of approaches. In a university context however, de Vries (2010) found that mentors were clustered towards the instrumental end of the continuum. She argued that instrumental mentoring, where the mentor acts as 'sage on the stage' limited the openness and learning of the mentee, and was therefore less conducive to pursuing an organisational change agenda. In contrast to this developmental mentoring, where Zachary (2000) describes the mentor as the 'guide on the side', opened up much greater possibility for the development of gender insight, and was therefore more supportive of bifocal goals. While de Vries (2010) advocated a focus on developmental relationships for these reasons, what is striking based on the work of Ibarra et al. (2010) is that developing greater gender insight on the part of the mentor is as critical to the success of instrumental mentoring as it is to developmental mentoring.

Negotiating the labyrinth

Despite these critiques of mentoring for women the prospects for women only programs remain positive. Women in universities remain keen to engage in mentoring programs and mentoring programs are positively evaluated (for example see de Vries 2005; Devos, McLean & O'Hara 2003; Gardiner 2005). These evaluations are primarily based on self-report, with a few important exceptions. Gardiner et al. (2007) in their article titled *Show me the money!* used a control group of women not selected to the program to show improved rates of promotion, success in applying for grants and improved publication rates for the mentees. Other forms of instrumental support also show positive outcomes. For example, Blau et al. (2010) in a US study used a control group to examine outcomes for female economists who attended a two day mentoring workshop, once again demonstrating positive outcomes in terms of grants and publications. A recent evaluation of a University of Wollongong Women in Engineering workshop show positive outcomes with participants reporting new collaborative projects (43%), greater professional confidence (69%) and valuing the importance of role models (61%). It appears that a small investment in instrumental assistance can go a long way. This fits with the notion of the career labyrinth and the ever-increasing competitiveness associated with building a successful career.

However the challenge of the bifocal approach as outlined by de Vries (2010) lies in dismantling the labyrinth for all women, even as women are being assisted to thrive and succeed despite the labyrinth. She argues that with increased recognition of what is required to make mentoring successful – that is an increased focus on the mentor, the mentoring relationship and the need for organisational change – mentoring has the ability to contribute to building more gender equitable workplaces

Innovations in mentoring

Mentoring programs have adopted various innovative forms, moving beyond the traditional instrumental approach and beyond reliance on a mentoring dyad. In practice these innovations address some of the criticisms that have been canvassed. Mentoring programs based around a dyad are often complemented by workshops and activities for the female mentees as a group, thus drawing on the politicising potential of the group (Anita Devos 2005). Peer mentoring and group mentoring programs can also utilise this advantage, by relying on collegial relationships to provide instrumental and/or developmental support. This has been found to be effective in developing women's careers (McCormack & West 2006) whilst minimising some of the problems of socialisation into the masculine culture associated with instrumental mentoring.

Group mentoring, for example at the University of Vienna (Nobauer & Genetti 2008) where one mentor meets with a small group of mentees has the advantage of not overloading mentors, being able to select mentors with the necessary developmental skills and enabling collegial relationships between mentees. It also duplicates the advantages of repeat mentoring, where the mentor, after being exposed to the stories of several women, begins to see patterns of systemic gendering. Nobauer⁵ reports that for one male mentor the commonalities of experience described by his four female mentees galvanised him into action to address systemic bias.

'Upward mentoring' strengthens a developmental focus for the mentoring relationship by building in an expectation that the more senior person will benefit from an increased exposure to minority group members (Giscombe 2007). According to Sodexo (2009:8) upward mentoring 'provides reciprocal growth and development opportunities. The women gain professional insight and guidance while senior leaders build their understanding of the challenges facing women in the workplace'.

Questions to guide practice

Allen, Finkelstein and Poteet (2009) in their book *Designing Workplace Mentoring Programs* focus on two key themes; firstly, 'that organizations should develop the program with specific objectives in mind and base decisions regarding design and structure of the program on those objectives' and secondly, to remember that 'at its core, mentoring involves an inter-personal relationship' (Allen, Finkelstein & Poteet 2009:xii). In addition women only mentoring program must bring a gender lens to the program objectives (the bifocal approach) and to the mentoring relationship. Combining these themes with the application of the gender lens can usefully guide practice.

⁵ personal conversation

Program objectives

The bifocal approach to mentoring incorporates a focus on the women's development and organisational change. This approach places emphasis on clarifying institutional objectives and including an intentional focus on the development of the mentor. It is therefore critical to consider the following questions:

What are the objectives of our mentoring program?

For the mentee?

For the mentor?

For the institution?

Clear program objectives are critical to minimising mismatches between the goals of the organisation, mentor and mentee. Many of the difficulties in mentoring relationships can be attributed to a mismatch in expectations between mentor and mentee, for example where a mentor adopts a developmental approach to a mentoring relationship while the mentee expects sponsorship. In addition a program with a bifocal aim, but where the mentor and mentee adopt a sponsorship approach may result in outcomes that satisfy the mentor and mentee yet fail to meet program objectives. Fixing the women without addressing institutional change may serve to reinforce gendered norms. Clarity of objectives will inform the nature of the mentoring relationship as previously described using the mentoring continuum. The following questions should be addressed:

How do we define mentoring?

What is our working definition of mentoring?

It should not be assumed that a mentoring dyad is the best or only option to meeting mentoring objectives. Consider options such as peer mentoring, group mentoring, upward mentoring, peer learning with guest mentors and so on. The question becomes:

What mentoring design would best address our purpose?

An interpersonal relationship

It is imperative to focus on all parties to the mentoring relationship, and how that relationship will be formed and supported.

What kind of mentoring relationship suits our purpose?

What is the role of the mentor and the mentee?

How will we select mentors and mentees?

What basis will we use for matching mentors and mentees?

What training and support do we need to offer mentors and mentees to achieve this approach to the mentoring relationship?

Women only programs with or without a bifocal approach need to address the ways in which gender will intrude into the mentoring program and relationship. This, as we have seen in the research of Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010), is as important to the success of sponsorship and other forms of instrumental mentoring that have an implicit focus on organisational fit, as it is to developmental mentoring that seeks to engage mentors and mentees in a two way relationship that builds gender insight.

Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010:85) concluded that for sponsorship to be effective, sponsors must 'learn to manage their unconscious biases'. Likewise the success of the bifocal approach depends on mentors and mentees developing greater gender insight within the mentoring program. In both cases this can be achieved through multiple means, training for mentors and mentees, resources used to guide the mentoring conversation, politicising of the women through meeting together, and public presentations by the women to mentors and other institutional members as happens in the UWA program.

How will opportunities to develop greater gender insight be designed into the program for the mentor and mentee?

How can we support the mentor and mentee to make changes within their own spheres of influence?

Regardless of which choices are made in the design of the mentoring program, be they sponsorship, broadly instrumental or more developmental, the necessity to include a gender lens to ensure that gender does not undermine the effort mitigates against reinforcing the gendered status quo. Finally, because a bifocal approach to mentoring has a broad mandate to develop not only women, but organisational members more broadly, it can encourage both opportunistic and planful ways of engaging with the university community. The final question becomes:

What other opportunities exist to create linkages between the WO mentoring program and other institutional members in order to develop gender insight and further the aims of organisational change?

Monitoring and evaluation

The women only mentoring literature, with some important exceptions, is uncritical and women only programs remain largely under-evaluated. Making clear distinctions between mentoring programs, approaches and design provides a firm foundation for carrying out meaningful monitoring and evaluation of program outcomes. A more explicit focus on the mentor naturally leads to consideration of mentor outcomes in program evaluations. Likewise a bifocal approach broadens the scope of evaluations to include the development of gender insight on the part of individuals and the link to organisational change.

Conclusion

Taking a critical stance towards mentoring for women provides opportunities for the sector to review and improve practice. An increased emphasis of the theoretical foundations and design of programs is required in order to address the ways in which the gendered status quo intrudes into mentoring relationships and mentoring programs. This can be addressed through the provision of workshops and resources to practitioners in the sector. The popularity of mentoring programs and their continued evolution into new avenues and innovative forms suggests that an investment into capacity building within the sector is timely.

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