

The forgotten workforce: female general staff in higher education

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Abstract

General staff have been a neglected part of the higher education workforce. The literature and data on academic staff has vastly overshadowed that on general staff. General staff issues are often overlooked by university managers. Yet general staff are an important and varied category of the higher education workforce. It is also a feminised workforce which perhaps partly explains its lack of visibility and some of the problems encountered there.

Recent data from 10 universities' payroll systems show that although females constitute a majority of general staff, they are disproportionately located in lower level positions. General staff are more likely than their academic counterparts to hold permanent positions. However, women are somewhat more likely than men to be in non-permanent jobs. The relationships between gender and level and tenure of position hold even when age and length of service are controlled.

Interviews with 50 managers of operational and academic departments identified some important issues for female general staff and shed light on the processes which reproduce gender disadvantage in this sector of the higher education workforce.

General staff in Australian universities

In contrast to the long-standing interest in female academic staff in Australian universities, there has been very little investigation of female general staff. While each higher education institution must monitor the employment profile of its total workforce for the purposes of compiling its annual report to the Affirmative Action Agency, the figures for general staff are apparently not invested with significance judging by the dearth of comment about them either by scholars or by official bodies.

A small number of papers have reported the contributions and discontents of general staff women in Australian universities and have highlighted the low level of interest in and the undervaluing of general staff women (for example, Crawford and Tonkinson, 1988; Butler and Schulz, 1995). The work on Australian general staff women carried out by Wieneke includes quantitative assessments of the position of female general staff across the industry. Wieneke's 1992 study analysed available DEET statistics, information from a 1990 EEO Survey of New South Wales universities and information from 1990 Affirmative Action Reports supplied by the institutions. The profile she sketched showed that while women constituted a majority (58%) of all general staff in the higher education sector (p. 11), they were highly concentrated in clerical, administrative and administrative support roles but were poorly represented among supervisors (p. 16).

Men averaged substantially higher salary levels than women (p. 23). General staff women earned between 77% and 83% of male salaries (p. 7). Women working in administrative and clerical positions were underrepresented in senior ranks even though the majority of employees in this area were female. General staff women had, on average, better qualifications than their male counterparts (p. 81). Few differences were apparent in the proportions of male and female general staff engaged as permanent, fixed-term or casual employees (p. 19) although women were more likely to be in part time employment than

men (p. 18). Wieneke elsewhere observed that affirmative action policy has implemented very few strategies which aim to encourage women to move into more senior jobs. Amalgamation of higher education institutions may have exacerbated these gender divisions (Wieneke, 1991:43).

Our research explores these issues further and looks at the location of women in the general staff workforce and the factors which shape the employment outcomes for these women. Data was provided to the researchers¹ by 10 universities in Victoria and South Australia on all employees paid during a designated pay period in August 1993. A separate analysis of general staff was carried out. This analysis allowed a further categorisation by the kind of job held (e.g. administrative or technical positions). Analysis of gender patterns was performed controlling for such variables as age, length of service and time fraction worked.

Interviews with department heads complement the information from studies which canvass the experience of female employees. They provide a rich source of information about the employment milieu in which general staff work and the elements of that work setting which affect women's employment outcomes. These interviews provided insights about the barriers women encounter, especially in securing more senior positions in the university workforce.

Women in the general staff profile

Women make up nearly two thirds (62.0%) of the total general staff workforce in the universities surveyed. They are, however, disproportionately located in the lower classification levels as the following table indicates. They also have a much lower average level of appointment than their male colleagues.

Figure 1 shows the decline in the percentage of female staff as the seniority level increased. Seniority is indicated by the ten HEW (Higher Education Worker) classifications.

Figure 2 shows the stark differences in the distribution of male and female employees across the classification levels. The profile of female employees is heavily skewed to the lower ranks while the male profile is much more evenly spread. We can further note that the proportion of male employees in senior positions is almost twice as high as the proportion of women. 38% of all men are employed at HEW6 and above (the 'senior' or 'career' classifications) in contrast to 21% of all women.

These relationships can be found in all job categories (administrative, technical and professional) within the general staff workforce. Table 2 below shows seniority figures for these categories.

Taking other factors into account

It is not uncommon for gender differences to be attributed to a legacy of past gender bias which is being overcome by more recent practices. Yet when we control for such factors as age, the gender differences remain. Among those under 40, 29.2% of men but only 17.1% of women hold senior positions (HEW 6 and above). For those 40 and older, 49.7% of men hold senior positions in contrast to 27.7% of women.

It may be the case, of course, that age is not the only control variable or the most appropriate. Women may embark upon their careers at a

Table 1 - Level of appointment by gender - general staff

| HEW Level * | Males | Females | % Female |
|-------------|-------|---------|----------|
| 2 | 431 | 729 | 62.8 |
| 3 | 630 | 1730 | 73.3 |
| 4 | 419 | 1163 | 73.5 |
| 5 | 629 | 774 | 55.2 |
| 6 | 434 | 532 | 55.1 |
| 7 | 410 | 332 | 44.7 |
| 8 | 244 | 196 | 44.5 |
| 9 | 100 | 72 | 41.9 |
| 10 | 135 | 61 | 31.1 |
| All levels | 3432 | 5589 | 62 |

* The HEW 1 classification has been omitted from this analysis because it largely applies to employees in blue collar occupations covered by separate awards. It does not constitute an integral part of the career hierarchy for general staff in administrative, technical and professional jobs.

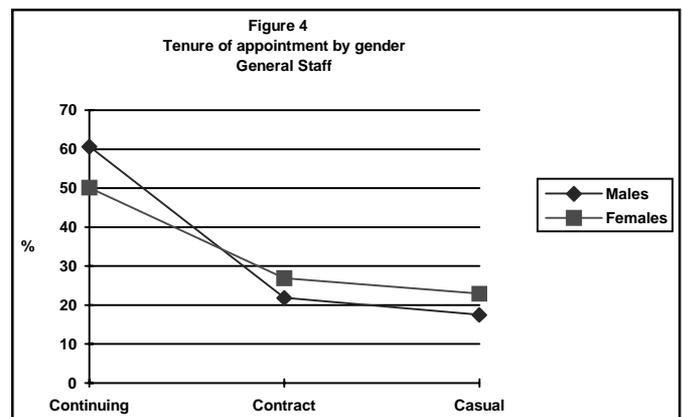
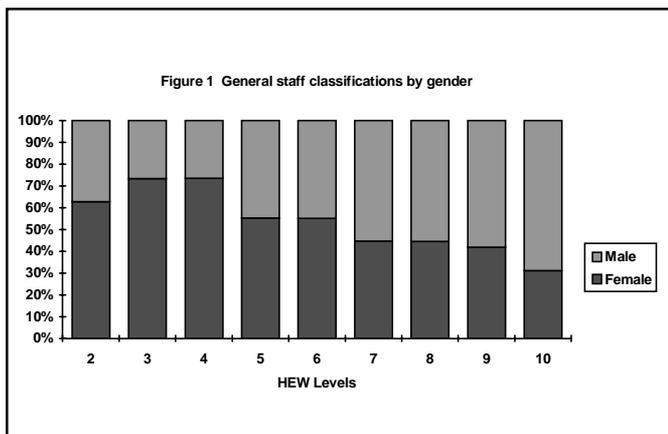
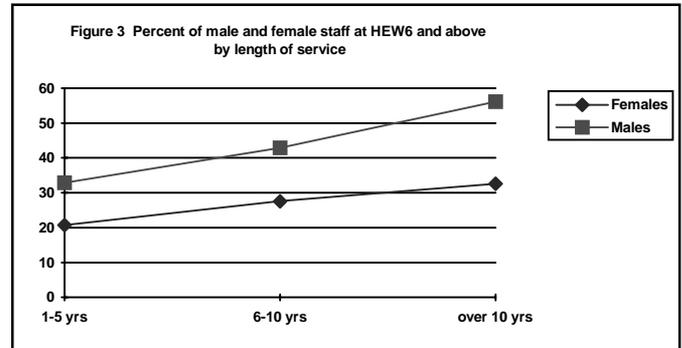
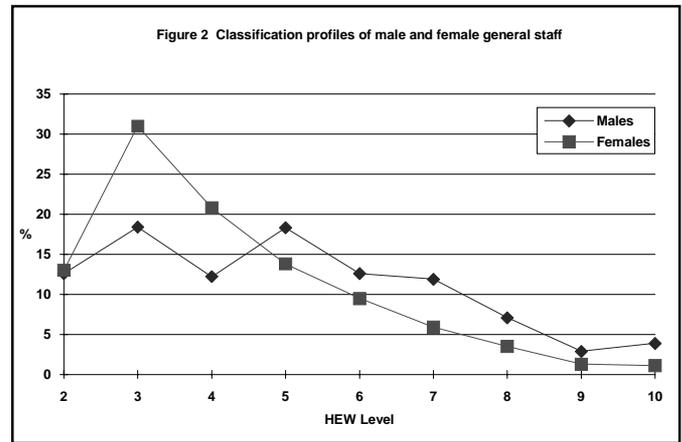


Table 2 - Per cent of general staff in higher levels by classification by gender

| Classification | % of men at HEW 6 and above | % of women at HEW 6 and above |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Administrative | 48.5 | 19.2 |
| Professional | 83.9 | 63.7 |
| Technical | 30.6 | 12.9 |
| All classifications | 43.3 n=2833 | 21 n=1116 |

later age after the early stages of childbearing. However, the gender disparity in seniority is also marked when the length of service with the university is used as the control variable. Not only are men with 1-5 years of service more likely than women to be in senior positions, but the gender gap widens with length of service so that among those with over 10 years service, 56.1% of men but only 32.6% of women are in senior positions. Figure 3 shows these relationships.

This suggests that employment practices within higher education may well exacerbate the men's advantages. Women would appear to have a much more difficult time gaining promotion through the hierarchy, even after long periods of employment with the university.

While these figures indicate a pervasive association between gender and HEW level, the relationships between gender and tenure for general staff are much weaker. Figure 4 shows the tenure profiles of male and female staff. This indicates that a majority of general staff hold continuing appointments. It also indicates that the proportion of female staff with permanent positions is lower than that for male staff while the proportion with contract and casual positions is greater.

The relationships within the global figures are, however, rather complex. Comparing male and female general staff who are under 40 years old, there are no notable differences in the level of permanency.

Forty-five percent of women and 46% of men under 40 hold permanent positions. However, for those over 40 years old, the disparities increase dramatically. Of those 40 years old and above, only 58% of women held continuing positions in contrast to 78% of men. Some might interpret this as a hopeful sign that younger women are doing well *vis-à-vis* their male colleagues, but it just as pointedly raises the question why older women lag so far behind their male counterparts. This could be attributed to a later entry of women into the workforce or the higher education sector of it. When we examine length of service data, these disparities remain though they are much smaller. For men and women with over 10 years service with the university, 94% of men and 88% of women hold permanent positions.

General staff at junior levels (HEW2-5) show relatively small gender differences in permanency (62% of males and 57% of females hold permanent positions). However, when we examine the permanency rates for male and female senior staff the gap widens. Of those at HEW6 and above, 81% of males hold permanent positions in contrast to 70% of females.

These findings depict a general staff workforce in which permanency is relatively widespread (at least in comparison with academic staff). This is probably due in large part to a greater range of alternative deployment options for general staff. The result is that gender differences in permanency are not great for general staff (except in senior positions). However, gender differences in level of appointment are significant and enduring.

Exploring gender dynamics in the general workforce

In exploring these issues, the research sought information about the views and experiences of a randomly-chosen sample of departmental managers in the universities which supplied the quantitative data. The 50 interviewees included 36 heads of academic units (departments or faculties) and 14 heads of corporate or operational units (such as libraries, computer services or registrars' departments). All of these managers had general staff employed in their units. As a rule, in the corporate units only general staff were employed.

From these interviews, several key factors in general staff employment were identified. Many of these factors affect all general staff but, given the female-concentrated nature of this workforce, they have especially serious implications for female staff. The factors are

- Lack of career paths for general staff
- Lack of staff development opportunities
- Flatter management structures which reduce promotion possibilities
- Bias in promotion decisions
- Masculine organisational culture and few women in higher jobs
- Lack of recognition of general staff and little systematic attention given to affirmative action, especially for general staff.

Lack of career paths

Seven managers pointed to the lack of career paths that general staff could pursue.

Commenting on the career structure of general staff in his area a dean thought it was

Pretty abysmal. That's accentuated by the fact that each division basically 'manages' their own administrative staff, there's no overall network. When you're dealing with (as in our division) less than a handful of admin staff, there's virtually nowhere for them to go within the division. Because the staff development is not really co-ordinated, perhaps I'm being over critical here, because staff development for general staff is not co-ordinated at overall institutional level, there's no real consideration whether 'Susan's' next position might be the secretary for the deputy director. If that position comes up and is

advertised and internal people are eligible to apply and sometimes get those positions - there's really no overall staff development plan.

One academic head highlighted the lack of recognition inherent in the system and its negative consequences for female staff.

...the classic model is that you get very dedicated women...who work in administration in academic departments which are not large enough for them to have a real career path. There's been a whole process of devolution of responsibility in this university from the central administration to departments. The responsibilities that those people, and as I say traditionally they have been women for all the reasons we know, have grown. Yet it's extremely difficult to get recognition of the fact that they are now doing a major administrative job because there was a tendency to say they're just departmental administrators. Yet a department such as this is larger than a lot of faculties in other places and yet we're running it with three administrative staff, two administrative assistants in the old terminology and one administrative officer, who I've had to battle very hard to get to be an administrative officer. The problem with that is that many of the classification schemes which are used are not appropriate for universities and this goes right across the board. University bureaucracies are not like other bureaucracies at a departmental level because of the fact that we diffuse the administration out on to academics, they do some of it as well. We don't have a hierarchical structure. So, for instance, the problem that I've had with our senior administrator is that, when I've made the case, as I have done repeatedly, for her to be promoted, people say but she doesn't have enough people responsible to her. I say no, that's because we run a very tight operation and other departments of either smaller or similar size have twice as many administrators, so why should this count against her if we're managing to do it here meaner and leaner. But if you look at it on the nice structured diagram, in terms of the position, how many people are important and so on. That's a battle that's ongoing. I have it all the time. Similarly I have the problem with technical staff. If you look in many, many successful university departments ... somewhere in there there is one or more women who have actually dedicated their lives to making the place run. The men come and go but it's the women who are actually driving the place along in terms of its continuity and its responsibilities.

A senior head with some thirty years of experience described a pattern of female general staff serving high profile academic males as almost a university tradition.

The bright career women who came into the universities 20 or 30 years ago, were women who today would be HEW7s or whatever, on their way up the administrative scale but these women just...selected their professor and devoted their lives to running the department for him.

He continued that these women have now left.

The people who have come in behind are those who don't have that ambition. So they're incapable of running what are increasingly complex departments. So we have this crisis of management within our departments. ... We've still got women...[with] limited ambition, who really don't want to be bothered with preparing themselves for other things, or even to expand their horizons within the job they are currently doing.

This tendency to blame the female general staff for their job position was not unique as noted below.

Several managers commented on the difficulty of getting administrative general staff within academic departments reclassified. They pointed to the inflexibility of the system of reclassification for administrative and technical staff.

I feel as head if I wanted to reward somebody, for instance if I've got a secretarial staff that's doing a lot more than she officially should do under her job spec, I would like to reward that. But unless I go and get it reclassified and I put in a good case for all that sort of stuff, that's where the system lets me down. (Head, academic department.)

An academic head spoke of his plans to restructure administrative positions in his department to reflect the broad responsibilities needing to be undertaken. However, his was an area with a large overseas operation which produced a significant amount of 'soft' money and the budgetary discretion to do so.

Lack of staff development

Although we did not ask questions about staff development programs for women general staff, a number of managers pointed to the weakness of their university in this area. A female corporate head spoke about the need for more staff development for lower level administrative staff.

Staff development's been something very important for me, not just personally but in terms of my staff. When I first came here we had no equipment. Staff had never been on any staff development. Our staff development branch runs a range of very useful courses that can be applied and can enhance the skills, things like communication, timing, management, dealing with stress, dealing with difficult situations, assertiveness training.

There are a range of one day, two day, week long courses. I think it's terribly important to enhance the self esteem, well in my case, the women staff who I've got, to enable them to do staff development. But I'm now very frustrated because there's very little left for them to do. I've sent them on the courses that I thought they ought to go to that they wanted to go to. I'd always get the timetable of classes and say I think this, this and this might appeal, are you interested. I never said, you will go to a course. They always come back just so much enthused. It's been an enriching experience and it's had enormous benefits for them personally and also for the office. But now I'm frustrated because there are lots of things I'd like to have the opportunity to encourage them to do but it's much harder for me, there's nothing being offered in house. So I guess what I'm seriously half looking at is saying to them, if you really want to do something in office management through a TAFE, I'll pay for it through the budget, my own office budget. But I don't think I should have to. I think that should be an EEO strategy, that there should be a bag of money set aside to encourage staff, but with the concurrence of the head of section so that I could be given the opportunity of matching funding....

Turning her attention to the discussion of the staff development needs of women middle managers like herself, this corporate head continued.

I think there's probably got to be a lot more encouragement. There are some outstanding women in middle management in higher education institutions who are simply not given opportunities in terms of professional and staff development because my experience is that the staff and professional development is not really taken very seriously. In my case for example, in order to enhance my own professional development I looked outside what was offered here and I undertook a postgraduate diploma in my own time. I completed a Master's in my own time and...I'm just embarking on a PhD. I find it would be wonderful if I had the opportunity to get staff development, professional development leave for example. I'm doing all that in my own time.

She also noted the 'lack of institutional perks' as she paid all her own fees.

Another manager said,

My view is that for many years technical and administrative staff in the university have been badly treated. Not perhaps compared with the harder parts of industry but there is a theory that the universities are not terribly developing. They don't practice what they preach in terms of staff development. It's a two class society.

Some of the managers tended to blame lower level general staff for being inflexible and wedded to their particular job. One commented that inflexibility was caused by staff 'owning' their job and refusing to move on. In fact a number of corporate heads made a similar point at some time during the interview

A head of department commented

I was told this morning of someone whose original job was to key in certain information into a database, now that that data base is going, they don't want to do anything else. The person's got a degree, intellectually someone's put a stamp of approval on her but it's a concern. It's not an isolated concern.

To the extent that such lack of career orientation may be found (and it is clearly not universal), it is a staff development issue. Lack of career aspirations on the part of female employees may well be influenced by perceptions that their employment context is not a welcoming one.

Flatter management structures and lack of promotion opportunities

There was some evidence of the thinning out of middle range positions and the pursuit of 'flat structures', which narrows possibilities of advancement from lower levels.

A corporate head in an amalgamated and restructured university spoke of a closing off of opportunity.

The university was sort of infatuated with flat structures. They said there'll be my position and then there would be about four administrative officers [at HEW5] underneath me and that's what happened. So I don't agree with that because it doesn't give people the chance to act in other positions and when I'm away. I often go overseas...and during that time we have never actually placed anyone in my position as an acting person....Now my level is [a HEW10] or something, and the structure I proposed was that there would be person at [HEW7] and then [HEW5 and HEW6] etc, What they did - left me at [HEW10] and created these four [HEW5s], there was too much of a gap between me and the others...But at the moment it's probably not the most satisfactory situation because it relies on people's goodwill to keep the office going while I'm away.

Bias in promotion decisions

Women general staff who do seek promotion may find that they are being judged on characteristics which are irrelevant to the position or on criteria of a stereotypical masculinity. Comments on the dynamics of interview panels were revealing in this context.

[It was] a top position in the university and I thought that the woman [applicant] was streets ahead of the other candidate but the comment was just made... 'it's a hard job' and that was just saying we want a man in this job, it's a hard job...That gives the game away...On another case I did challenge a person who said that it was a potential cause of concern that she'd moved jobs and I point out that this was a pattern in women's careers. (Head, corporate department)

Five interviewees suggested that female candidates were not 'aggressive enough'.

The low level of women in senior corporate positions, despite their high level in the general staff workforce, is alarming. Only 5.9% of women are at levels HEW 8-10 while 13.9% of men are located at those senior levels. This scarcity of senior female staff does not encourage women who aspire to promotion in these universities. Although this study did not focus upon women general staff in senior positions, there is some evidence that when and if women do achieve these positions they are met by a rather unwelcoming and overwhelming male culture.

Only three women were interviewed as heads of corporate areas. While this small group can in no way be seen as representative, it is worth noting that all three spoke of the difficulties they had experienced working at that level. All three spoke of the masculinist character of senior levels of university administration and in this context. One remarked,

I have a pet theory about why men end up in senior appointments in this place. It's because the whole place is run by men.

Barriers to women were noted, despite university regulations which prescribe an equal opportunity environment. Despite the guarantee of female representation on selection panels, one of the female heads complained of feeling like a token.

I think there's a very definite gender bias in things like selection panels. There's an assumption that you are very new to this and even if you have been in the institution for a number of years, that you haven't had the experience or expertise. There's an assumption that you haven't got any practical or theoretical experience in asking appropriate and probing questions, that you don't bring any life experience that will be relevant to selecting appropriate personnel. There's an assumption that because you've only had x number of years in a particular institution there's nothing before that, it's a blank, you're a completely blank person, but you perhaps raised children and that was all.

Another female head commented that at senior levels selection panels are loaded with senior men and that 'seniority determines the weight of the voice'. She believes that such panels tend to select men. She also commented that she had seen no evidence of head hunting for women applicants and that 'EEO is given the same weighting as a smoke free zone'.

All of these women noted the hollowness of affirmative action achievements. One commented on staffing policies.

It's just that our staffing policies, implementation of equity and staffing policies is not a standard that I knew in the public service quite honestly.

All three made distinctions between male and female managerial styles. One argued that only when more women are in top positions will women's skills and qualities be more highly valued. She noted,

I think my experience would be that [a female manager in the area] has selected people who are better with people out of that process. The person who held that job before she did would probably have put more emphasis on financial skills - accounting type people.

All recounted stories of how they personally had missed out on opportunities, been frozen out or not taken seriously because they were women. A more focussed study of senior women in university administration may well confirm such findings. In any case, it seems that the US scheme one woman head spoke of, the National Identification Program, which earmarked and worked with senior women administrators, could be a good model to investigate, both for middle management and senior women. These programs should operate across universities to provide the scope for development that is needed.

Lack of recognition of general staff; lack of affirmative action awareness

Two other factors appear to contribute to the low status of general staff women. One is the tendency of managers, especially in academic units, to overlook the general staff in responding to questions about gender issues. Half of the managers responded only in terms of academic staff although the questions explicitly sought information about all staff. This 'blind spot' mirrors the neglect of general staff in the higher education system as a whole.

There seems to be some evidence that general staff women, a major group of women working in universities, are almost invisible in relation to special programs aimed to improve women's position in the workforce. The majority of the responses about affirmative action initiatives were couched in terms of female academics and their students. This suggests that Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity are seen as being less relevant to general staff women, perhaps because they are a majority of the overall general staff workforce. This is a misperception because their participation in higher levels and in permanent positions lags behind that of men.

In fact, the level of knowledge about affirmative action among those interviewed was disappointing. Only about a quarter of the interviewees showed a good grasp of affirmative action principles as well as familiarity with their universities' affirmative action programs. Several frankly conceded their lack of knowledge in this area.

Women themselves would know more than I would [about what would be effective in increasing the proportion of women in continuing and higher level positions]...You need a policy to prevent discrimination on interview panels. [In answer to what affirmative action initiatives

the university has]: There's a whole policy which I couldn't recite chapter and verse...People who chair selection panels have attended courses, we all have booklets, things like that. (Head librarian in present position for five years).

[What affirmative action initiatives has your university devised to increase the number of women in continuing and higher level positions?] I don't know, you'd have to ask personnel, they'd be the best people to ask. Some of them would be there and I probably wouldn't even notice them...If they were all being listed I'd say, oh yeah, I know all that, but I can't think of any. I know we're an equal opportunity employer, whether they go further than that I don't know. (Corporate Head in current position two years.)

Directions for action

Among the heads of department interviewed there were a number of good ideas about what needs to be done. Some of the strategies mentioned were improved job design and job rotation to overcome the lack of career opportunities, especially in academic units which tend to be isolated. Others mentioned shadowing and mentoring schemes (including such initiatives as the National Identification Project cited above) to encourage women into senior administrative and management positions. There must be, however, more coordinated strategies which have support at senior management levels. There is a clear need for universities to pursue energetically the career development of women in junior, middle and senior levels. Rotation of staff through positions and functions, the use of acting positions, job 'shadowing' and mentoring all need to be addressed. The staffing establishment of administrative areas needs to be examined in the light of the need to enable progress from the lower grades.

The evidence strongly indicates that higher education institutions have to attend to this neglected (and often forgotten) group of employees. It is indeed ironic, if not shameful, that universities, which are devoted to the advancement of knowledge and claim leadership in social and intellectual matters, should have within their midst a group of workers who are often treated in an almost feudal manner and to whose education and career development little attention seems to have been devoted. The hidden curriculum effect of this means that today's university students, the leaders of Australia tomorrow, are being told implicitly that women administrative staff are unimportant and not particularly valuable. The question must be asked whether universities should be allowed to continue in such a way.

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Footnote

1. The study was supported by an ARC Collaborative grant in conjunction with the NTEU. The other members of the research team were Wendy Bastalich and Patrick Wright. Linda Gale of the NTEU was a collaborator in the research. A full account of the research is reported in *Limited Access: Women's Disadvantage in Higher Education Employment*, South Melbourne, NTEU, 1995.