Building a new landscape for leadership

Fresh courses on offer are designed to help women reach the top of the corporate ladder, writes Becky Barker.

Courses and conferences designed for women wanting to excel in management are gaining popularity across NSW. Gender-specific learning might sound out of step with a generation aimed at equality and diversity, but more and more businesswomen are seizing the chance to share their experiences in a “sisterhood” environment, academics say.

Rosamund Christie, who is heading the first Women in Leadership program at the Australian Graduate School of Management in May, says the course sprang from the success of International Women’s Day in March and an acknowledgment that gender balance, particularly in the upper ranks of business, needs to be addressed further. “The course is for women who want to make a difference to their own career and to the leadership landscape of Australia,” Christie says of the eight-day, $14,000 program.

The course, similar to programs in the US and Britain, follows a 2010 census by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, which shows Australia trails the US, Britain, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa in the percentage of women on company boards.

Recent statistics from the Australian Institute of Company Directors show females hold 13 per cent of board positions and 8 per cent of senior executive roles. Encouragingly, the total companies with no female board directors fell in the past year from 54 per cent to 34 per cent.

Macquarie University’s faculty of business and economics has pioneered the push for corporate gender equity. Its annual Women, Management and Work conference has been running for 23 years and attracted 200 mostly female participants in July.

“Seven or eight years ago, there was a bit of a backlash from younger women who didn’t want to be part of something where women were singled out,” says conference co-ordinator Melanie O’Connor, the managing director of advisory company The Academy Network. “But in recent years that has reversed. We redesigned the conference so it is more interactive and used platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Ninety per cent of the people coming this year were new attendees.”

O’Connor says the event is not about pitting women against men. “This is not about man-bashing,” she says. “It’s just that there is a place for women-only conversations—they lead to open, honest conversations that women might not otherwise have and are extremely important for networking.”

The Curtin graduate school of business in Perth launched a women in leadership course two years ago, while the University of Queensland business school hosted its fifth Women Executive Leaders course last month.

The executive director of Women on Boards, Claire Braund, welcomes the concept of courses for females. “Australia ranks first in women’s educational attainment but it is 40th in women’s workplace participation...”
and there is a lack of promotional and development opportunities,” she says.

She would like to see the topic of corporate gender balance take a prominent role before students reach postgraduate education. “Rather than creating new courses, why aren’t we putting time into undergraduate courses and playing out these conversations around workplaces in their existing course structure?”

While it is clear courses tailored for women help focus, encourage and enrich them, there are other issues, such as unconscious bias and office culture, that need to change before more females will be promoted, says the director of postgraduate studies at Macquarie University’s faculty of business and economics, Anne Ross-Smith.

“There is a place for these programs but training on a course is not going to make someone board-ready,” she says. “What they seem to imply is that women need to be fixed and I don’t share that view, when organisations and society need to pay more attention to this.”
ASSOCIATE professor Emma Robertson says lessons can be learnt about the value of women's courses from universities that have offered them to staff for years.

Robertson attended the first Academic Women in Leadership (AWIL) course for staff at the University of NSW in 2006, after leading its school of design for four years and reaching a crossroads in her career.

“I felt like I had been working on a solo path and it took me on a journey which brought about a seismic shift in my thinking,” Robertson says.

She consequently stepped back from her post as faculty presiding member to become co-ordinator of the bachelor of design, mentor students and focus on her artwork, which is now held in seven public collections in four countries.

“I have become less ambitious but it was extremely personally satisfying,” she says.

Robertson credits the course as being one of the catalysts for improved gender balance in the senior ranks of UNSW. Last year, 25 women from UNSW applied for promotion to associate professor – the highest number of submissions in 13 years.

Since the AWIL program was introduced, it has been extended to women in the early stages of their academic careers, along with women's workshops and interview tests.

The University of Newcastle and the University of New England also conduct in-house women in leadership initiatives, while the University of Sydney started a similar course for staff 16 years ago.

The assistant director of the staff and student equal opportunity unit at the University of Sydney, Dr Maree Murray, says: “While the situation is gradually changing, women are still significantly under-represented at senior levels.”

Eyes opened ... UNSW associate professor Emma Robertson.