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Students, Careers and Employers. Findings from an International Study

Historically Women's and Gender Studies programs (WS/GS) worldwide emerged from strategic political and intellectual agitation by women rather than from employer pressure for specific skills or knowledge; a fact that may foster understandings of these fields as having somewhat attenuated links to the labour market. Yet we know relationships between fields of study, anticipatory career expectations and actual labour market outcomes are increasingly complex ones in a world where the shape of work is rapidly changing. I am reporting here on findings from a three-year international study which examined three sets of stakeholders whose understandings of the possible relationships between Women's and Gender Studies, career aspirations and employment experiences I felt we needed to understand better: (1) enrolled students; (2) careers advisers and employers with graduate hiring responsibilities; and (3) recent graduates. Survey responses were received from approximately 780 students enrolled in WS/GS programs at four universities in Australia, three in the United Kingdom and five in the United States[1] and these responses were set alongside a small qualitative interview program with employers and recent graduates. In each of these national domains, Women's and Gender Studies programs have been institutionalized for approximately three decades and the programs are generally located within the Humanities and/or Social Science faculties, although individual programs may utilize study electives and faculty expertise from beyond these areas.

At the time I began my study, the relationship between WS/GS programs and students' labour market experiences was a largely neglected issue.[2] While some limited attention had been given to graduate tracking (see Luebke and Reilly 1995; Stearns 1994), two emerging factors suggested to me the need to examine the issue in more detail. The first factor was the clear shifts in educational, fiscal, and political priorities throughout the western academy which indicated it was going to be increasingly difficult for teachers and researchers, especially those in public

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[1] Surveys were distributed in Australia at Flinders University, Monash University, University of Sydney, and Victoria University; in the United Kingdom at University of Hull, Lancaster University, University of Surrey Roehampton; and in the United States at Duke University, Ohio State University, University of California (Irvine), University of Southern Maine and Washington State University. They were distributed to two cohorts of students: those in the first year of study and those approaching graduation. Surveys first asked students about their reasons for enrolling in WS/GS and their levels of satisfaction with the program, before moving to questions on career plans and the relationship between those plans and their enrolment in WS/GS. They concluded by asking respondents basic demographic questions.

[2] For a discussion of why these issues had not been widely considered see Dever, Cuthbert and Dacre (1999).

institutions, to continue fostering WS/GS programs without clear understandings of students' career aspirations, their post-graduation experiences, and the changing environment in which important educational and employment decisions are negotiated. The new consumerist logic of western higher education systems has replaced the liberal ideal of education as a public investment in a wider social good with one in which education is an investment individuals make in themselves and their own futures, a way of buttressing themselves against risk and uncertainty (see Marginson 1993; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Taken together with growing rates of unemployment and underemployment among university graduates in many western societies, this has meant that not only administrators, but students (and their families) were placing a new emphasis upon the so-called "vocational relevance" and the long-term "rewards" of particular degrees (see Skeggs 1995, 477). This has sponsored an increasing preoccupation with the post-graduation "marketability" of individual fields of study, together with the production of new hierarchies of regard among academic disciplines. Students are encouraged by the media, educational institutions, and families to opt for so-called "vocational pathways" that promise the best return on their investment in higher education, with fields of study perceived to have strong, identifiable links to specific labour market opportunities routinely deemed by commentators, institutions and students alike to be more "relevant" and "rewarding" for graduates' future working lives.

A second and related factor was the rapidly changing nature of the contemporary labour market. The vision of life-long career progression within a single position, occupation or industry was no longer a viable one and the current pace of technological change dictated that many of the jobs for which our graduates were destined were yet to be imagined. Further, in the new deregulated and "flexible" employment marketplace, direct relationships between qualifications and careers have also been radically destabilized, along with the notion of higher education as providing a guaranteed "gateway" to secure employment. So while the dominant messages higher education institutions continued to offer students on the pathways from study to employment promoted predictable outcomes and seamless, linear transitions, the reality was that we were now living in a world where "even the highly qualified are entering into a radically restructured labour market in which greater flexibility and contingency are at play, and for whom a dilemma arises because the meaning of career has changed" (Wyn and Dwyer 2000, 150).

Significant findings from the study were:

- **Career or vocational concerns did not feature prominently in students' initial reasons for enrolling in the field.** When currently enrolled students were asked their reasons for choosing WS/GS, no more than 5% of respondents selected career or employment prospects as a reason, with the majority (between 70% and 90%) indicating that "interest in the subject" was their primary motivation for enrolment. Similarly, "passion" for the material was cited as a key reason for them continuing their studies in this field. This pattern of selecting concentrations according to interest rather than with a view to career prospects

is not an uncommon one among students enrolled in generalist degrees. However, it was thrown into relief here by the finding that — depending on the campus — anywhere between 14% and 60% of the same students indicated that they were "somewhat anxious" or "highly anxious" about their prospects of "securing satisfactory employment and establishing a career following graduation". These figures were considerably higher than those found among the control groups and suggested a heightened sensitivity to employment-related issues among the WS/GS cohorts. Furthermore, the perception of Women's and Gender Studies' vocational potential relative to other fields did feature in some of the students' decisions *not* to continue on with a concentration in WS/GS. First year students selecting "yes" to continuing with WS/GS generally related their decision directly to their satisfaction with the course in which they were currently enrolled, writing of their "passion" and "fascination" for the course material. In contrast, while some of those who selected "no" or "undecided" with respect to continuing also sought to explain their decision in terms of their relative satisfaction levels with the course, a significant minority couched their responses explicitly in terms of either seeing "no career prospects" flowing from WS/GS or of being unable to discern what "career options" the degree or major might offer. As one such student observed, "I don't know where this will take me". While it should be noted here that the capacity of entry level students to assess the longer term vocational benefits of any program of study may be limited, it is nevertheless worth considering the impact that the mere perception of the relative career potential of different fields might ultimately have on students' likelihood of continuing within a program. And the data here seem to suggest that while clarity around career and employment issues may not be crucial for those opting to continue studying WS/GS, it could be a factor for those deciding not to. This suggests the importance of engaging students early in a dialogue about these issues.

- **The career "usefulness" and "credibility" of WS/GS was a feature in students' discussions with peers and family members as to the value of studying WS/GS.** This was often linked to a perception of the field as "esoteric" or "narrow", leaving students who were enthusiastic about the area conflicted in the face of palpable pressure to select more "rewarding" study pathways. While some students offered responses like "[my family is] supportive of any decision I make" and "they trust me to study whatever I value as important", others obviously experienced pressure to explain and/or justify their enrolment. "They thought of it as an interesting subject but compared it to 'basket-weaving'", one student reported, while another wrote that "My father wouldn't pay for my education any longer, so I transferred to where I could pay for it myself". Responses such as these were commonplace: "women's studies is regarded by them as not a 'proper' subject"; "psychology ... is regarded more highly academically" and "since dropping pre-med, they're very interested in the job I'm going to get with a women's studies degree". Friends and peers, by contrast, were reported as more likely to be "hostile" or "ridiculing" towards WS/GS, with

career-value questions being raised in comments such as: "when do you plan to get a 'real' or 'normal' major?" and "[the field is] worthless in relation to income". These attitudes were frequently linked to perceptions of the field as "esoteric", "narrow" or "separatist": a poor, perverse or risky choice with respect to their futures. The core assumption was that WS/GS was not "real" (or not as "real" as other possible majors) and was unable to "provide a good background and basis for [a] career". It is a notable irony that "the very material we use in our teaching in regard to equal opportunities and the structured gender inequalities in our society is empirically demonstrated by the discrimination against any qualifications with the 'Women' label" (Price and Owen 1998, 185). While many students appeared keen to resist these particular constructions of WS/GS, some nevertheless harboured their own related concerns. A small number indicated frustration that the field which interested them passionately was generally not "highly regarded" and, in their experience, did not appear to share the same status – either inside or outside the academy – as other arts and social science disciplines. A few wished the field had a more "impressive" title, while others worried that it did not appear regularly in the job advertisements they saw ("all the workplaces I have looked at don't include women's studies as a subject area requested"). A significant proportion of students accepted that these perceptions of the field were ill-informed, but they were nevertheless anxious that they would be shared by employers, negatively affecting their future employment prospects. Indeed, in response to a separate question, between 75% and 85% of the same students indicated that they believed the general community's understanding of WS/GS to be either "inaccurate" or "highly inaccurate". Stefanie Thomas in her autobiographical account of studying Women's Studies perceptively notes that while "common stereotypical impressions" of Women's Studies students (and feminists) generally derive from "ignorance", it is ultimately those students who "carry the weight of the ignorance" in routine interactions (Thomas 2001, 16). The picture that emerges is of a body of students who exhibit a general sensitivity to career and employment issues and experience palpable pressures concerning the desirability of selecting potentially "rewarding" study pathways. Nevertheless, the majority seemed content to establish their own priorities for their degree studies. One indicative response from students was that their enrolment in WS/GS was "something I am doing for myself". On the one hand, these responses accord with the findings of Manuela du Bois-Reymond on young people's growing reluctance to commit themselves in a world where they have multiple options available to them, but remain unwilling or feel they are unable to make a "good choice" (1998, 66). As du Bois-Reymond observes, unlike their parents' generation who valued predictability of actions and developments within the life course, these young people prefer to shape their personal biographies around "contingency and openness", viewing their future as a constantly evolving "project" to be managed, adapted, or perhaps abandoned in favour of an alternative one (66). On the other hand, given that there is "a

growing mismatch [in the contemporary labour market] between actual credentials and employment outcomes" (Wyn and Dwyer 2000, 151), what might seem to their parents and peers to be risky or wilful decisions, could well turn out to be more strategic and rewarding – both personally and professionally – than the strictly vocational selections they are counselled to make. This strategic element in the students' approach to their studies becomes even more apparent in their assessments of the benefits they derived from their WS/GS enrolment.

- **Students who were close to completing their undergraduate studies in WS/GS appeared to hold quite firm opinions about the broader professional and workplace applications of a WS/GS qualification.** While first year students were relatively unclear about the links between WS/GS and future employment prospects, advanced level students demonstrated more nuanced readings of the connection. They clearly understood that WS/GS would not necessarily "qualify" them or alone provide for their entry into particular professions, students nearing graduation nevertheless readily nominated a wide range of employment destinations where they believed the specific skills and knowledge acquired in WS/GS "would be an advantage". These included: social work, welfare, criminology, policing/correction services, and law; education, academe and research; government, policy, and politics; media, advertising, marketing and journalism; human resources; and the healthcare professions. A common perception among those surveyed was that WS/GS provided them with more of the "how" than the "what" when it came to career and workplace issues: it offered them important ways to read and negotiate systems, ideologies, and power structures. Further, in response to specific questions, these students showed that they were capable of identifying potential career benefits deriving from WS/GS and of devising their own understandings of what might constitute "vocational" returns from the field. The most frequently listed were general knowledge and specific knowledge of feminism and women's issues, together with a range of important applied and process skills such as critical analysis, research and writing. However, another commonly reported quality was that of increased "confidence", "assertiveness", or "self-worth", occasionally expressed quite specifically as "confidence as a woman in the workplace". Positive attitudinal change (e.g. increased open-mindedness) also rated highly. This particular finding complements trends identified in other research which indicates that WS/GS programs and students place a high emphasis on personal transformation as an outcome of both curriculum and pedagogy (see Griffin 1998; Lovejoy 1998). But it also suggests that one benefit of this type of research might be the fostering — among teachers and students — of a more detailed understanding of how the personal is also vocational. After all, "one of the key determinants of early success in a graduate career and indeed, for that matter, throughout a career, is confidence" (Perkins 1992, 29). Beyond the specific knowledge gained from their studies, the WS/GS students placed emphasis on a collection of transferable personal and professional skills (i.e., confidence, communication skills, team working, creativity, verbal reasoning) as

holding key career benefits for them. This mode of interpreting their studies is significant given that labour market analysts suggest that in future it will be broad sets of qualifications like these rather than training for a specific job or vocation that will be the key determinant of many young people's employment pathways (Australian Council of Social Services 1996, 15). These findings intersect productively with those of Luebke and Reilly in *Women's Studies Graduates: The First Generation*. The accounts of the diverse career pathways of graduates offered there, clearly showed that graduates engaged with ideas and concepts drawn from the field in ways that were strategically useful to them. And those graduates believed that women's studies "made them better at what they have done since graduation" (1995, 199).

- **When asked to nominate their planned or desired career destinations, students nominated an extremely broad range of employment sectors**. This suggests that they understand their futures as taking them beyond any simple one-to-one fit between the political content of these programs and the types of career and employment pathways they hope to forge, away from what we might think of as an "employment-as-activism" scenario which frequently posits policy, advocacy and caring professions as typical or desirable employment sectors for WS/GS graduates. While between 30% and 50% of the different student cohorts indicated "a women's organization" as one of a range of potential employment destinations for them, significant numbers also listed education, law, entertainment as well as the arts, media, public administration, health, IT, business etc. Asked whether the skills and knowledge developed through WS/GS were "central", "of some importance" or "unrelated" to their future career plans, 73.4% of the US majoring students rated them as "central" to their career plans, with a further 23.4% considering them to be "of some importance". While the Australian and UK cohort recorded lower ratings for "central" (around 40%), each still recorded around 50% of students selecting "of the some importance". The appended comments of those who selected "of some importance" suggest this answer was often chosen where students saw themselves deriving indirect rather than direct benefits from the study or where, as one student phrased it, they felt WS/GS would "enhance" their careers but would not be "pivotal" to them. Others appeared to select this response when they were undecided about their future career directions, but believed WS/GS offered useful "background knowledge" or that "knowledge of gender relations is always useful to have". While course websites advising on careers generally lean towards the view that WS/GS graduates can or will lead with their "gender edge" as they move into post-graduation employment, the data here would seem to indicate that students do not necessarily construct their career aspirations along the same lines. Instead they see the transferable personal and professional skills, developed in women's studies programs, as having equal or greater significance for their future careers as the political/structural insights. Although a significant number demonstrate an interest in women's organizations (or the equity and diversity bureaucracy) as one possible employment option, it would appear that

these students equally see themselves potentially moving into a wide variety of mainstream employment sectors. It is probably necessary for us as WS/GS teachers to recognize that the notion that WS/GS might inspire graduates to seek employment in areas which offer specific opportunities for making a material difference to women's lives is underpinned by an investment in a definition of feminism and of feminist political engagement that may well not be shared by these students. Indeed, as McRobbie argues so succinctly, we need to recognize that a new generation of young women students "may decline the invitation to identify as a 'we' with their feminist teachers and scholars" (2004, 257), instead framing their achievements in education and work in terms of "me". In tune with neo-liberal discourse on the individual, today's students may not necessarily identify themselves and their achievements in education and work as connected to any collective political movement, but may read them as a form of "female individualism" that casts them as "privileged subjects in the new meritocracy" (2004, 258).

- **Many of the anxieties expressed by students about the future 'worth' of their studies were not matched in the experience of graduates or in the views of employers**. Both groups testified in different ways to the strategic potential of the skills and knowledge acquired in Women's and Gender Studies programs. One significant finding was that the majority of employers recruiting graduates with generalist degrees were far more interested in graduates' transferable personal and professional skills (i.e., confidence, communication skills, team working, creativity, verbal reasoning) than in the specific knowledge gained from their studies. Indeed, as has been observed elsewhere, "the better the personal skills the less the discipline seems to matter" (Perkins 1992, 28). In the words of one interviewee, students with any humanities or social science concentration needed to be strongly encouraged to think about their studies from two quite different perspectives: "one of them is the content of the subject they have studied and the other is the skills they have developed as a result of studying that subject". Interestingly, many of the WS/GS students surveyed were actually moving towards interpreting their studies in just this way. Throughout the interviews, employers and careers advisers alike argued that graduate applicants with generalist degrees were rarely assessed solely in terms of what appeared on their academic transcripts and that detailed distinctions were seldom made among the different humanities and social science disciplines unless there was a compelling need to do so (e.g., specific requirements for languages or statistical skills). While grades were generally taken to be a reasonable indication of ability, they nevertheless took second place to the demonstrated skill base. This suggests that the field of WS/GS could perhaps benefit from encouraging its students to recognize and name the genuine vocational strengths of the empowerment and personal transformations they experience, together with those feminist process skills which they develop through their studies (see Schniedewind, 1993). Again, the message seemed to be that "the personal is also vocational". While no explicitly negative responses to WS/GS as an area of

academic endeavour were elicited from amongst interviewees, problems associated with the general lack of awareness or understanding of the field were raised by a number of them. These concerns tended to be associated less with the public sector where it was considered greater progress had been made in the recognition of gender issues than with the private sector where it was felt the lack of specific knowledge of WS/GS could prompt potential employers to make recourse to a range of familiar, if somewhat inaccurate, gender stereotypes. In particular, several interviewees reported their suspicion that workplaces which remained heavily segregated along gender lines and exhibited workplace cultures and career achievement structures strongly marked by entrenched traditions of corporate masculinity were probably likely to consider a WS/GS graduate as someone who was "bolshy" or "politically correct", who possessed no sense of humour, and who was unlikely to fit easily into the prevailing workplace culture! In these environments, they suggested the field of study itself was also likely to be interpreted as "softer" or "lesser" and that such candidates, if selected at all, would likely be channelled into the small number of "soft" positions in human resources dealing with equal opportunity compliance etc. Interestingly, one employer from the travel and tourism industry — who admitted sharing some of the same opinions herself before she returned to university and enrolled in a graduate Women's Studies program — suggested some potential employers could be similarly "intimidated" by the field, while others might simply make well-meaning but erroneous assumptions about its apparently limited application in their particular workplace. One of the university careers advisers outlined this latter scenario in the following manner:

> If [the employers] are graduates themselves, then it was twenty years ago, and things have changed. And particularly with an Arts course where the directions, the emphases can be so wide and varied, I think employers have a very vague knowledge of what the student has come out with... So what they are saying is, "Oh, so you've done Women's Studies as a major, that means you must know about women and women's issues and women's politics. Well, we're not an organization that deals with women's issues, you need to go and work at a women's health centre. You won't be suitable for me." Whereas that's not the case at all.

A further issue to emerge from this discussion was the suggestion that WS/GS' particular location within a broad humanities or social science degree might prompt some potentially negative responses that had little to do with any aspect of the field itself. In this scenario, the positive vocational attributes WS/GS programs may foster in the way of transferable personal and professional skills would be in danger of being overlooked in the race to generalize about the famously "non-vocational" attributes of generalist degrees and their graduates. In contrast to these reported attitudes, however, a different range of responses was elicited from interviewees in the community sector and NGO area. Here WS/GS was characterized as a potentially important qualification and a positive attribute in a graduate. The manager of the local office of a major aid

organization who had previously worked in the finance industry summed up her current experience of WS/GS graduates as follows:

> The way I see Women's Studies working in employment is usually [as an] adjunct to another degree or another major, usually people [in this office with Women's Studies qualifications] have double majors... it is not an uncommon discipline for female employees [here]. It would have been much more uncommon in other organizations [where I've worked] for me to hire Women's Studies graduates... Gender is one of our areas of work and a major thematic too. We have gender specialists, it's a big part of our program... we are an organization where political activism is an advantage, not a disadvantage.

The message here was that the WS/GS qualification was considerably enhanced and took on new, demonstrably "vocational" qualities when judiciously coupled with either relevant work experience or a second major or postgraduate qualification in fields like politics, sociology, anthropology, or journalism. Employers in the community and NGO sectors were readily able to "make sense of" and "apply" the qualification in this context. The strong emphasis on work experience that was elicited also reinforced how important the common practice of incorporating internships into WS/GS programs can be in giving students an "edge" when seeking post-graduation employment opportunities. It was consistently stressed throughout interviews that since the majority of employers could not be expected to have a detailed and current working knowledge of all humanities and social science degrees, the responsibility ultimately rested with WS/GS graduates to explain their major in ways that employers can grasp. Indeed, interviewees repeatedly noted that "the onus is on the student or the graduate to demonstrate the relevance of the study they have done" or that "it really is up to the student to paint that picture for the employer". This was felt to be especially important for a field like WS/GS where, in common with many other humanities and social science fields, there is not necessarily a "direct connection" to a specific professional or vocational pathway that graduates and prospective employers can take for granted. While it was felt that there were ultimately plenty of potential openings for Women's Studies graduates, it was noted that few recruitment advertisements would actually specify WS/GS. As one careers adviser observed:

> Occasionally you might see "Women's Studies graduate needed for..." but as a rule you tend not to see that. But in a paper every week there are at least half a dozen vacancies that would be suitable...

In this sense, it is up to WS/GS graduates to imagine, identify and forge their own pathways and, in order to do so, these graduates need to be able to understand and talk about their studies and what they have gained from them in ways that "translate" effectively beyond the campus gates.

Interviews with graduates also produced a rather different picture from the one anticipated by students in the survey. Several of the graduates confirmed the view that their WS/GS education had assisted them in figuring out "how things

worked" and that to them the application of this knowledge was indisputably "vocational". The value these graduates now placed on the critical insights generated in their studies meant that any sense of uncertainty they may have felt as students about where WS/GS might take them had been displaced through their successful application of such insights in the employment market. This occurred even when individual graduates were initially doubtful about such possibilities. For example, one interviewee noted that she received considerable respect in her workplace on the basis of her knowledge and her skill level, something that she had not expected. She felt that some of her current professional opportunities had emerged from this respect and recognition. For her, the question of the application of WS/GS to workplace settings was easily answered: she used the insights generated in her Arts degree and specifically from WS/GS "every day". Countering the view that course material explored in WS/GS held limited workplace application, several graduates indicated this material provided valuable resources for managing workplace issues such as sexual harassment. Still another, who worked with issues of access and equity in a legal context, indicated that feminist insights formed part of a set of skills and knowledge that were central to her effective operation in her workplace. Most of the graduate cohort indicated that although WS/GS takes gender as its key critical axis, they had also developed their awareness of other equity flashpoints, such as racial discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage. They argued that these insights were crucial to their current professional activities. They confidently critiqued those narrowly technical definitions of the "vocational" often promulgated within universities, demonstrating a strong awareness that labour market definitions of the "vocational" were broader and related far more to a capacity to demonstrate (and build upon) a suite of skills, than to specific "expertise" acquired within academic programs. In their experience, it was this aptitude for learning and for critical engagement that was vital to developing a satisfying and successful career path. They rejected outright suggestions that WS/GS was "mickey mouse" or unrelated to the "real world".

Overall, findings from the study suggest the need for the WS/GS field to engage actively with the questions of careers and employment as a critical part of the on-going development of the field and its continuing struggle for legitimacy, both of which are clearly linked to debates on the status of women both inside and outside the academy. Not to do so would also risk ignoring the increasingly complex nature of our students' negotiations with the very hierarchies of knowledge and systems of value that this field took as its initial points of departure. Focusing on these questions will enable us to problematize prevailing models for interpreting the relationships between educational goals and labour market outcomes. This is not simply an attempt to "play 'the game' of vocationalism" (Letherby and Marchbank 2001, 598), but an effort to demonstrate that there may be opportunities for us to deliver not only meaningful insights for students and staff into the developing project of WS/GS, but to re-enter a dialogue with those around us about the significance and status of WS/GS. A similar point is made by Nicky Le Feuvre with

respect to the European Union funded study of the relationships between women's employment, Women's Studies and equal opportunities.[3] While acknowledging the ambivalence with which WS/GS teachers frequently approach the "emerging education market", she nevertheless argues that the "future of women's studies will obviously depend, at least in part...on our willingness to present the professional trajectories of our graduates for public scrutiny" (Le Feuvre 2002, 120). She further contends that "a better understanding of the links between our courses and qualifications and the labour market is essential for the elaboration of effective strategies to promote women's studies in countries where progress to date has been slow...[and] to reinforce the institutional status of courses in those countries where significant inroads into the academy have been made over the past 15 to 20 years, but where further progress is hampered by the current 'student recruitment crisis' for some of the existing courses" (113). It would also mean examining the processes by which our students come to understand different fields as "relevant" or "useful" and hopefully allaying some of the evident confusion and anxiety numbers of them experience on this front. If we recognize the strategic and self-reflexive imperatives of new marketplace opportunities, and accept the value of the experience and tactical knowledge that necessarily reside in successful WS/GS programs, we are indeed particularly well equipped to mediate and participate in these challenges with our students and colleagues.

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[3] For further information on this project, see www.hull.ac.uk/ewsi.

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