



Gender responsive teaching practice within tertiary education

Knowledge Paper

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Introduction

The purpose of this Knowledge Paper is to demonstrate the importance of gender responsive¹ teaching practice within tertiary settings,² provide an overview of the existing knowledge base and practice resources and highlight areas that need further investigation and development. The Paper outlines the teaching methodologies, skills, professional learning, and systems level support required to embed effective gender responsive approaches within teaching practice.

In Australia, gender responsive teaching has more commonly been undertaken within school settings, often as part of an approach to support respectful relationships and sexuality education in the context of initiatives for the prevention of violence against women. Within the tertiary education sector, most examples of gender responsive teaching practice are within the university context. There is limited research and few practice examples within the vocational education and training context. Additionally, there is limited guidance for tertiary educators – and no standardised professional learning – on how to implement gender responsive practice.

Research conducted by [Monash University](#) in 2019, as part of the *Gender Equity Training Project*, led by Women's Health Victoria, highlights a number of effective approaches for teaching gender equality within the tertiary setting. There is an opportunity to build on these initial learnings to develop guidance to enable tertiary educators to implement gender responsive practices within their teaching.

Defining gender responsive teaching practice

Gender responsive teaching practice refers to teaching practice that is both responsive to the needs of males, females and gender diverse people and reinforces gender equality within its approach (Chapin & Warne 2020a).

Gender responsive teaching practice requires the teacher to unpack gendered norms and practices across different elements of teaching practice, including: teaching methodology, the learning environment, relationships (among students and between teacher and students), classroom management, and teaching and learning materials (Chapin & Warne 2020a). For example, this may include examining gendered representation and inclusion

¹ This Paper uses the term 'gender responsive'. Other synonymous terms used include 'gender aware', 'gender informed' and 'gender sensitive'.

² Tertiary education includes all post-compulsory school education, vocational education and training, non-accredited training and higher education.

within teaching and learning materials, challenging gendered stereotypes that may influence how students interact in the learning environment, reflecting on the internalised gender bias and gendered attitudes of teachers and students, and addressing inequitable access to power and resources among students based on gender.

Examples of gender responsive teaching practice:

(adapted from Chapin & Warne 2020a)

- **Gendered representation within teaching and learning resources:** Consider whether recommended external resources have a balance of female and male authors.
- **Inclusion within the learning environment:** Assess if the classroom set-up is inclusive and accessible for all genders. For example, displaying the rainbow flag symbol and providing space for people to introduce their pronouns may assist LGBTQI learners to feel welcome in the space.
- **Stereotypes within teaching and learning resources:** Consider if learning examples use stereotypes that reinforce rigid ideas about roles and professions that are suitable for different genders; for example, men in leadership positions and women in caring professions.
- **Gendered bias and relationships:** Teachers should consider their own gender bias and how it impacts on relationships with students; for example, whether they ask male students to answer questions about science more frequently than female students, based on an unconscious belief that men know more about science than women.
- **Power and classroom management:** Analyse if men, women, and gender diverse people all contribute to the discussion equally. For example, consider how different facilitation styles might increase participation by women and gender diverse people.

The need for gender responsive teaching practice in tertiary education

Gender responsive teaching practice aims to increase gender equality through reducing barriers to participation in tertiary education for women and gender diverse people, maximising learning opportunities for all genders within the classroom, and ensuring teaching practice does not inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes and inequalities (Cuesta & Witt 2014).

Promoting gender equality within tertiary education can also contribute to broader gender equality goals by creating a skilled gender-balanced workforce that can reduce gender segregation in the workforce and increase female representation in areas often dominated by men (GEN VIC, WAVE & WHV 2020). Increasing the gender balance in male dominated industries is key to improving gender equality (AHRC 2017). Research also demonstrates

that increasing gender equality within male dominated industries, such as construction, has numerous benefits for those industries including productivity gains (Victorian Government 2019).

Teaching practice that is not responsive to the different needs and experiences of males, females, and gender-diverse people can be described as gender insensitive. Gender insensitive teaching practices can reinforce gender stereotypes, hinder the equal participation of all genders, perpetuate attitudes that reinforce inequality and draw on learning and facilitation styles that preference men (Hinton-Smith et al. 2019).

Reinforcement of gendered inequalities in the classroom is sometimes referred to as 'the hidden curriculum' and can negatively impact female students' learning experience, academic outcomes, retention and recruitment rates, and ultimately impact career pathways.

For example, traditional pedagogical approaches can influence the format and facilitation of discussions in a way which results in male students typically speaking more and being perceived as more confident (Hinton-Smith et al. 2019), while some female students, specifically those in STEM subjects, have reported feeling underestimated by both teaching staff and fellow students (Chapin & Warne 2020a). This reinforcement of gendered inequalities in the classroom is also referred to as 'the hidden curriculum' and can negatively impact female students' learning experience, academic outcomes (Baltic Gender 2019), retention and recruitment rates (Chapin & Warne 2020a), and ultimately impact career pathways.

Gender responsive teaching practice and intersectionality

Intersectionality is a vital component of gender equality initiatives (Our Watch 2021a). Intersectionality recognises that gender 'intersects', or crosses over with, other social identities, including (but not limited to) indigeneity, ethnicity, age, religion, race, class, sexual orientation and disability. This creates interdependent systems of discrimination and privilege at both an individual and a group level (WHV, 2020).

Historically, 'gender inequality' has often referred to inequalities between men and women and therefore excluded consideration of gender diverse people. As part of an intersectional and inclusive approach to gender responsive practice, gender diversity needs to be acknowledged and teaching practice must account for the needs and experiences of gender diverse people (Brunila & Kallioniemi 2018).

Addressing intersecting forms of discrimination should be part of any approach to gender responsive teaching practice to ensure that the needs and experiences of all learners are addressed. For example, initiatives that aim to increase participation of women must ensure that the particular needs of women who experience other forms of discrimination – such as women of colour, who may experience racial discrimination in addition to gender discrimination – are considered within the approach. This may include adapting or

developing specific strategies to increase the participation of women of colour that acknowledge and address the intersecting forms of discrimination they may experience. For instance, teaching and learning material should include positive representations of all women, inclusive of women of colour, and avoid negative stereotypes that portray women of colour in subordinate positions without agency.

Teaching methods to support gender responsive practice

Recent Victorian research has identified several specific teaching methods and approaches that support gender responsive teaching practice. Key elements include approaches that enable critical reflection, support values-based learning, and aim to transform attitudes and behaviours (Clemans et al. 2019). Critical reflection and transformative learning are seen as central to gender responsive teaching practice due to “the focus on dismantling beliefs and using self-reflection to critically engage with key concepts in order to integrate new learning” (Chapin & Warne 2020b).

Teaching methods that support gender responsive practice enable critical reflection, support values-based learning, and aim to transform attitudes and behaviours.

Teaching and learning approaches that are conducive with gender-responsive practice can include: pedagogies of discomfort, narrative based learning, and problem-based learning.

Examples of teaching and learning approaches that can promote gender equality within teaching practice: (Clemans et al. 2019)

- **Pedagogies of discomfort:** This approach acknowledges that challenging ideas about gender, power and equality can create discomfort and resistance amongst learners and that discomfort can support learners’ own critical reflection. This may include learners acknowledging their own gender bias to enable transformation in behaviour and attitudes.
- **Narrative-based learning:** This is where learners use their own narratives to increase understanding of concepts and ideas. This approach supports the integration of individuals’ social contexts to support critical reflection that is meaningful to them.
- **Problem-based learning:** Problem-based learning is undertaken in small groups, is learner-centred and can support critical reflection within the group context. Key to this approach is ensuring a gender analysis is also applied to this process. For example, do the group dynamics enable women, men, and gender diverse people to contribute equally to the discussion?

Professional learning for effective gender responsive teaching practice

Although there is limited research on what constitutes effective professional learning for gender responsive teaching practice, there is a consensus within the literature that gender responsive teaching practice requires well-trained teachers who have a strong understanding of gender equality themselves (Brunila & Kallioniemi 2017). Gender responsive teaching practice requires teachers to apply the principles of reflective practice to their teaching to ensure they are not reinforcing gendered inequalities (Clemans et al. 2019, p. 26).

Additionally, teachers require skills to understand and challenge the gender dynamics within different elements of teaching practice and the skills to deliver the specific methodologies that have been identified as enablers of good gender responsive teaching practice. This aligns with evidence from the secondary school context that recommends professional development for staff should include reflection on staff’s own gendered beliefs and attitudes, an understanding of how existing teaching practice can reinforce gender norms, and skills for integrating gender equality within the curriculum (Our Watch 2021b). Evidence from the secondary school context has also found that quality professional learning for staff better supports student safety, teacher confidence and the sustainability of efforts to reduce gender inequality (Our Watch 2021b).

Increasing gender equality across tertiary education structures and systems

Evidence shows that to make meaningful and sustainable change in gender equality work, efforts need to go beyond stand-alone activities and aim to influence all domains of the setting (Our Watch 2021a). This means that in order to embed gender equality within tertiary settings, efforts need to go beyond gender responsive teaching practice and ensure that the teaching institution’s policies, structures and practices also promote gender equality.

A whole of institution approach to gender equality reinforces the messages promoted within gender responsive teaching, increasing the impact and sustainability of gender responsive practice.

Integrating gender equality across an institution is also known as mainstreaming or taking a whole of institution/setting approach to gender equality. It involves integrating gender equality across all components of a tertiary institution including the business and operations, research, student life, teaching and learning and the institution as a workplace (Our Watch 2021a). For example, an institution might implement recruitment strategies that avoid gendered stereotypes in advertising

material and specifically aim to recruit women into courses traditionally dominated by men. A whole of institution approach to gender equality reinforces the messages promoted within

gender responsive teaching, increasing the impact and sustainability of gender responsive practice.

In addition, gender equality needs to be integrated into the broader systems, structures and policies through which tertiary institutions are funded and influenced. For example, government policies that increase access to childcare or decrease the cost of tertiary education can reduce gendered barriers to accessing education. In the context of vocational education and training, which is heavily influenced by the needs of the labour market and employers, labour market planning and industry practice must also be gender-responsive if the benefits of gender responsive teaching practice are to be realised. For example, gender-disaggregated labour market forecasting should be used to inform planning for vocational education and training, and industry should apply an intersectional gender lens to their own employment, recruitment and retention practices.

Future directions

Embedding gender responsive teaching practice within tertiary education in Australia is essential to increase gender equality within the tertiary sector as well as to contribute gender diversity and equality within the Australian workforce. Although some initial efforts to increase gender equality within tertiary settings have been undertaken, this has largely been within university settings as part of initiatives to prevent violence against women. There remains a gap in the research and practice guidance, particularly within the vocational education and training context.

Further investment is needed in researching, developing, and piloting effective professional development approaches to upskill tertiary educators to implement gender responsive teaching practice. This should draw on existing evidence from the school context, as well as the initial research conducted by [Monash University](#) (as part of the *Gender Equity Training Project*, led by Women's Health Victoria), which illustrates effective pedagogical approaches to teaching gender equality within tertiary education settings.

To be most effective, all efforts to embed gender responsive teaching practice within tertiary settings should be undertaken as part of a whole of institution/setting approach, and be supported by structural changes to the funding, planning and broader policy settings which shape tertiary education.

Practice resources

Gender responsive teaching practice

- [Gender responsive pedagogy in higher education: a framework](#) International Network for Advancing Science and Policy (INASP), 2020
- [Integrating gender responsive pedagogy into higher education: our approach](#) International Network for Advancing Science and Policy (INASP), 2020
- [Tools and resources on gender-sensitive teaching methods in higher education](#) Baltic Consortium on Promoting Gender Equality in Marine Research Organizations, 2020
- [How to teach students about gender equality \[Opinion\]](#) Saga Briggs, 2018
- [Introduction to gender-responsive teaching methods \[Presentation\]](#) United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 2018
- [Gender Sensitive Education Project \(project\)](#) Gender SensED, 2020

Pedagogical approaches to support gender responsive teaching practice

- [Teaching gender equity: a toolkit for teaching gender equity units of competency](#) Women's Health Victoria, 2020
- [Supporting gender equity education: a research project to inform gender equity units of competency](#) Women's Health Victoria, 2019

Mainstreaming gender equality approaches across education settings

- [Mainstreaming gender pedagogy in higher education curricula: practices, challenges, futures: final project report](#) and [Mainstreaming gender pedagogy: toolkit](#) University of Sussex, 2019
- [Educating for equality \[Website\]](#) Our Watch, 2021
- [Preserving gender equity as a higher education priority during and after COVID-19](#) Australian Higher Education Joint Sector Position Statement, 2020

- [Promising practices in workplace and organisational approaches for the prevention of violence against women](#) Prepared by RMIT University for Our Watch, 2015
- [Compilation of good practices to promote an education free from gender stereotypes and identifying ways to implement the measures which are included in the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education](#) Council of Europe. Gender Equality Commission, 2015
- [A guide for gender equality in teacher education policy and practices](#) UNESCO, 2015
- [Gender equality and social inclusion strategic framework 2020-2022](#) Australia Pacific Training Coalition, 2020

Best practice gender equity training courses

- [22521VIC Course in Gender Equity](#) Women's Health Victoria, 2019
- [Gender Equity Microcredentials](#) Women's Health Victoria, 2019

Education sector guidance on gender equality/equity – Australia

- [National plan on gender equality: education and training](#) Equality Rights Alliance, 2019
- [Guidance note: Diversity and equity: Version 1.2](#) Australia. Tertiary Education Standards and Quality Agency (TESQA), 2017

Further reading

Gender responsive teaching practice

- [The need for gender equity in teaching practice](#) Women's Health Victoria 2020
- [How gender conscious pedagogy in higher education can stimulate actions of social justice in society](#) *Social Inclusion*, 2014
- [Gender and lifelong learning critical feminist engagements \[Open access textbook\]](#) Routledge, 2017

Gender equity in education to support gender equality in the workforce

- [Why a gender lens on VET policy is vital for recovery from the pandemic](#) McMahon, K (LinkedIn), 2021
- [Skills for Victoria's growing economy \[Submission\]](#) Gender Equity Victoria, Women in Adult and Vocational Education, Women's Health Victoria, 2020
- [Productivity Commission: Response to the interim report on National Skills and Workforce Development Agreement \[Submission\]](#) Gender Equity Victoria, Women in Adult and Vocational Education, Women's Health Victoria, 2020

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- Chapin J, Warne V (2020a) **Gender responsive pedagogy in higher education: a framework**. International Network for Advancing Science and Policy (INASP). Available from: [URL](#)
- Chapin J, Warne V (2020b) **Integrating gender responsive pedagogy into higher education: our approach** International Network for Advancing Science and Policy (INASP), p5. Available from: [URL](#)
- Clemans A, Subban P, Gleeson J, Komarzynski L (2019) **Supporting gender equity education: a research project to inform gender equity units of competency**. Women's Health Victoria. Melbourne. (*Gender Equity Training Project Research Paper*). Available from: [URL](#)
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- Hinton-Smith T, Brayson K, Morris C, Marvell R (2019) **Mainstreaming gender pedagogy in higher education curricula: practices, challenges, futures: final project report** University of Sussex. Brighton. Available from: [URL](#)
- Our Watch (2021a) **Educating for equality: a whole of university approach [Website]** Our Watch. Melbourne. Available from: [URL](#)
- Our Watch (2021b) **Respectful relationships education in schools: evidence paper** Our Watch. Melbourne. Available from: [URL](#)
- Victorian Government (2019) **Building Gender Equality: Victoria's Women in Construction Strategy 2019-2022** Victorian Government. Melbourne. Available from: [URL](#)
- Women's Health Victoria (2020) **The Course in Gender Equity 22521VIC: Unit VU22770 Develop a gender lens to support gender equity work: Learner guide**. Women's Health Victoria. Melbourne.

About Women's Health Victoria

Women's Health Victoria is a statewide women's health promotion, advocacy and support service. We collaborate with women, health professionals, policy makers and community organisations to influence systems, policies and services to be more gender equitable to support better outcomes for women. As a statewide body, WHV works with the nine regional and two statewide services that make up the Victorian Women's Health Program. WHV is also a member of Gender Equity Victoria (GEN VIC), the Victorian peak body for gender equity, women's health and the prevention of violence against women.

GENDER RESPONSIVE TEACHING PRACTICE WITHIN TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Women's Health Victoria acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land we are based on, the peoples of the Kulin Nation. As a statewide organisation, we also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands and waters across Victoria. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and that we are beneficiaries of stolen land and dispossession, which began over 200 years ago and continues today.

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