

Students given skills and savvy to crack glass ceiling

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More than half of university graduates are women yet the senior ranks of corporate Australia are full of men.

Much attention has been focused on tackling the issue of gender diversity at board and senior executive level but the University of Queensland Business School suspects the problem could be addressed much earlier – among students. The school has partnered gender diversity consultancy Emberin, headed by former Telstra Business Woman of the Year Maureen Frank, to develop a training program to prepare female graduates for the workforce.

Ms Frank said women needed to build “political savvy” and make themselves more “visible” in the workplace.

“Guys understand the informal networks almost instantaneously,” she said. “My theory is if we can teach girls some of this stuff at university, it might possibly change things.”

Gender diversity has been heavily debated in recent years, prompting the Australian Securities Exchange to act.

As of January 1 this year, listed companies have been required to outline, within their annual reports, achievements against measurable gender objectives set by their boards.

They also have to report on the proportion of female members of their boards in senior management and employed throughout the organisation.

“Fifty-five per cent of graduates are women and they are coming out with better grades,” Ms Frank said.

“It’s difficult to understand why that doesn’t translate to the workplace. Within two years of them starting, they’re lower paid and in lower positions.”

The training program will be adapted from materials used by Emberin with corporate clients including National Australia Bank, Qantas and Amcor.

Students will be placed in workshops and exposed to senior women from the corporate, government and non-profit sectors. A trial will involve the university’s alumni, current MBA students and undergraduates.

Business school academic dean Iain Watson said universities weren’t in the habit of teaching women – or men for that matter – what to expect once they entered the workforce.

If successful, the program would be rolled out broadly, including for male business students, he said.

“I think there’s probably a significant group of men who would love to do more but are perhaps a little bit anxious about that process,” Professor Watson said. “What we would be looking at here is providing a way of engaging which removes the anxiety.”

The Australian Financial Review

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Emberin head Maureen Frank says women must be ‘more visible’. **Photo: Tamara Voninski**