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## Women's studies and the discourse of vocationalism: Some new perspectives

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### Synopsis

The transformation of western higher education systems within a broadly consumerist logic has generated a new focus upon the post-graduation marketability of individual fields of study. Only those subjects perceived to have strong links to identifiable labor market openings are labeled “vocational” and these are deemed by institutions and students alike to be more “relevant” and “rewarding” with respect to their future working lives. Within these discussions, the Women's Studies major is frequently characterized as “useless” and “nonvocational”. This paper explores the discourse of “vocationalism” as it circulates in and around the field of Women's Studies, arguing that the experiences of Women's Studies students and graduates, together with shifts in the contemporary labor market, suggest important ways of reconfiguring the meanings of the vocational with respect to Women's Studies. It represents findings from international surveys of more than 700 undergraduate Women's Studies students and from qualitative interviews with employers, careers advisors, and Women's Studies graduates.

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### Background

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](#); [Skeggs, 1995](#); [Slaughter & Leslie, 1997](#)). 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 subjects perceived to have strong, identifiable links to specific labor market opportunities routinely deemed by commentators, institutions, and students alike to be more “relevant” and “rewarding” for graduates' future working lives. Within this educational environment—one in which “vocational relevance” operates as a central measure of value—the notion of Women's Studies as holding little or no vocational potential for its graduates circulates with axiomatic force. These characterizations typically stress the “poor” or “risky” choice the field may represent for students.<sup>1</sup>

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Assessments such as these are arguably bolstered by images and stereotypes of Women's Studies that circulate both inside and outside the academy, confirming its problematic status as an academic program. Personal experience indicates that comparatively few people—including friends and families of colleagues and students—have an accurate understanding of what Women's Studies is, with most believing it to lie somewhere between domestic science, midwifery, and consciousness-raising.<sup>2</sup> For some people at least, the failure to attribute vocational significance to the field may derive from a general lack of awareness of the field's very existence or a misreading of its specific curriculum. The fact that Women's Studies programs emerged from strategic political and intellectual agitation by women rather than from employer pressure for specific skills or knowledge may further contribute to perceptions of the field as having negligible links to the labor market. This perception is presumably compounded by the major's traditional location within generalist academic programs like the BA degree, programs that until relatively recently rarely stressed explicit engagement with vocational outcomes among their primary functions (see [Eggins 1992](#); [Lewington 1998](#)), preferring to talk instead of the "intrinsic" rewards deriving from scholarship and individual self-development. Then, there is the long-standing question of the field's "seriousness" and "significance." The interdisciplinary nature of Women's Studies, something students and teachers understand as a virtue, continues to register for outsiders struggling to fix its identity as an inherent weakness or limitation, a sign of the field's "dilettante" or "mickey mouse" quality. And the mere fact of the field having taken women—that well-known numerically dominant minority—as its principal focus of inquiry inevitably leads others to perceive Women's Studies as "narrow," "soft," or "subjective"; that is to say, of marginal concern to those in search of "real" or "useful" qualifications. 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 & Owen, 1998](#), p. 185).

Irrespective of the means by which individuals inside or outside the academy understand and evaluate

the Women's Studies major, discussions of its "vocational potential" are generally informed by an understanding of the "study-work" couplet that presumes three things: a confidence in the notion of the "right" education providing a guaranteed "gateway" to secure employment, a neat one-to-one fit between educational qualifications and subsequent employment outcomes, and a narrowly technical understanding of what skills and knowledge hold utility for future work. And yet, research into the new deregulated and "flexible" labor market suggests these assumptions may no longer be well founded. While employment outcomes for graduates remain better than those of nongraduates,<sup>3</sup> for the generation born since 1970 the links between education, training, and employment reflect far greater uncertainty and contingency than they did for earlier generations. Within the new economy, the once close relationship between an individual's qualifications and career outcome has been radically destabilized. Indeed, while the dominant messages higher-education institutions offer students (and their families) on the pathways from study to work continue to promise seamless, linear transitions and predictable employment outcomes, the reality is that we now live in a world where "vocational integration" or the extent of fit between sphere of study and area of employment is sufficiently poor for education to be regarded as at best a risky form of investment" ([Wyn, 2000](#), p. 67).

It would seem timely, therefore, to take up the term "vocational" and to consider anew how it might operate with respect to Women's Studies and how shifts in the broader social, economic, and political contexts within which crucial education and employment decisions are being negotiated might offer the field new opportunities to challenge the ways in which individual study majors are currently evaluated for their "utility." In what follows, I analyze findings from research conducted over several years into the post-graduation labor market aspirations and experiences of Women's Studies students and graduates and point to outcomes that problematize prevailing models for interpreting the relationships between educational goals and labor market outcomes. This is not, as [Letherby and Marchbank \(2001, p. 598\)](#) worry, simply an attempt to "play 'the game' of vocationalism," but an effort to demonstrate that there may be avenues to turn that game on its head. These avenues may deliver

not only meaningful insights for students and staff into the developing project of Women's Studies, but may simultaneously equip us to re-enter a dialogue with those around us about the significance and status of Women's Studies. A similar point is made by Nicky Le Feuvre with respect to a large-scale European Union funded study examining the relationships between women's employment, Women's Studies, and equal opportunities.<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging the ambivalence with which Women's Studies practitioners 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, p.120). She further contends that "a better understanding of the links between our courses and qualifications and the labor 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 15–20 years, but where further progress is hampered by the current 'student recruitment crisis' for some of the existing courses" (Le Feuvre, 2002, p.113).

### Gathering data

My initial interest in questions of vocational outcomes emerged from a need to balance my students' desire for a more coherent account of what Women's Studies might genuinely offer them beyond graduation with increasingly urgent institutional demands to justify our Women's Studies program in terms of concrete "outcomes." When I turned to the available literature, I was struck by the paucity of information as historically the field of Women's Studies has rarely addressed questions of graduate career aspirations and vocational outcomes in a systematic fashion. Two early reports produced under the auspices of the National Institute of Education in Washington—*The Relationship Between Women's Studies, Career Development and Vocational Choice* (Bose & Priest-Jones, 1980) and *Women's Studies Graduates* (Reuben & Strauss, 1980)—endeavored to

find preliminary answers to the questions "what is the impact of women's studies on students' career aspirations?," "why major in women's studies?," and "what do women's studies graduates do?" As available data were sketchy, both sets of authors rightly argued that without more detailed and coordinated studies, there would be few definitive, measurable outcomes for practitioners to point to. They recommended comprehensive national data gathering and graduate tracking, longitudinal studies of Women's Studies cohorts, systematic examination of students' changing aspirations across the period of their Women's Studies enrollment, the development of definitions and measures of the professional and personal transferable skills fostered within Women's Studies, and profiling of the different types of Women's Studies programs emerging. One can only marvel at the databank we might have now had their recommendations been taken up in practice.

The 1990s saw some renewed interest in these questions. Chris Stearns in a 1994 essay gives a brief account of a comparative survey of Women's Studies graduates from two U.S. universities (Towson State University and Wake Forest University) in which questions relating to the vocational impact of Women's Studies featured prominently. She argued that the collective responses to the survey "reveal the transforming effect of a WMST education" (Stearns, 1994, p. 66) with graduates generally indicating significant direct and indirect correlations between their women's studies enrollment and the "work they do" (p.66). Barbara Luebke and Mary Ellen Reilly's book-length qualitative study, *Women's Studies Graduates: The First Generation* (1995) is the only detailed published study published to date. This volume profiles 89 Women's Studies graduates from a range of programs across the United States, offering accounts in the graduates' own words of how they relate their studies to their subsequent study, career and life paths. Through the revealing testimonies of its graduate informants, Luebke and Reilly's work admirably demonstrates the flexible nature of a Women's Studies qualification and the extent to which Women's Studies' ethic of empowerment readily translates from classroom to the workplace.

Relationships between subject (or degree) choice, anticipatory career expectations, and labor market outcomes are increasingly complex ones

(see Lyon, 1996). Graduate tracking of the type employed by Stearns and by Luebke and Reilly is certainly useful for determining where graduates went, but it tells us little about where they hoped or expected to go, how they imagined the transition from study-to-work, or about employers' recruitment principles and attitudes towards Women's Studies: information that is clearly integral to a more textured understanding of how our graduates negotiate the contemporary labor market and how different understandings of the "vocational" impinge on those negotiations. For this reason, in my own research design, I adopted a multifaceted approach to data gathering rather than simply opting for graduate tracking. I identified three specific sets of stakeholders whose understandings of the possible relationships between Women's Studies, career aspirations, and workplace applications I felt I needed to access: current students, careers advisers and employers with graduate hiring responsibilities, and recent graduates. It was hoped that the layering of these three sets of data would provide a way of contesting and reconfiguring the discourse of "vocationalism" as we currently experience it. The first level of research involved surveying a wide spectrum Women's Studies students internationally on their career aspirations, the relationship they saw between their enrolment in Women's Studies and those aspirations, and on the skills and knowledge they felt they were deriving from Women's Studies. The survey targeted two particular student cohorts: (1) those enrolled in entry-level subjects who were reviewing their options for majoring and (2) advanced level students with a women's studies concentration who were approaching graduation and presumably contemplating their working futures. Following a smaller pilot study in 1998,<sup>5</sup> surveys were distributed across 2000/2001 to four institutions in Australia, three in the United Kingdom, and five in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Responses were received from a total of 781 students (639 at the entry level and 142 at the advanced level).<sup>7</sup> To gain a keener sense of how the career attitudes and aspirations expressed by Women's Studies students compared with those of other students enrolled in generalist degrees, control groups of entry-level and advanced undergraduates across a range of arts and social science disciplines (politics, history, communi-

cations, and tourism studies) at Monash University were also surveyed.

The second level of the research involved those who recruit new graduates or advise them on their future employment options. I began with a preliminary contact list of more than 100 local careers advisers and graduate employers across the particular anticipated career destinations nominated by the students themselves in their survey responses and after initial telephone and mail contact approximately 10% of these were selected for in-depth interviewing. These included the career advisers from each of the Melbourne universities boasting substantial Women's Studies programs. These interviews were designed to elicit both details of their general practices in evaluating prospective employees and any specific attitudes or expectations they held with respect to a graduate with a major in Women's Studies.

The third level of investigation involved semi-structured interviews with a selection of recent graduates of the Women's Studies program at Monash University. Graduates were recruited through the networks of the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research and interviewed by staff who had not been directly involved in their undergraduate teaching.<sup>8</sup> This procedure was adopted to minimize the focus on their relationships with individual staff members in favour of a broader focus on disciplinary practices and vocational outcomes. The graduates interviewed were pursuing a number of professional paths: some academic, some in community service, others in the private sector, and in local government. The purpose of this phase of the research was not to "track" graduates' employment histories, but to focus instead on how they personally defined "vocational attributes," on whether they saw vocational elements within Women's Studies and, if so, how these figured in their own career and employment trajectories. It thus differed in methodology and scale from the comprehensive review of graduates' employment pathways reported by Luebke and Reilly. Nevertheless, it was informed by the same desire to provide "graduates a forum for speaking" and by a similar recognition of the importance of gathering "expert" input from graduates at a time when the work of the academy is increasingly embedded in the conflicts and questions of "employability" and "usefulness" (Luebke & Reilly, 1995).

### Making 'good' choices

Contrary to older educational and employment discourses that posited education as a preparation for work, it is now apparent that increasing numbers of young people are participating simultaneously in work and study (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1999; p.9; Moodie, 2001, p.45), suggesting many are experiencing changed relationships both to their educational performance and their engagement with the workforce. The cohorts surveyed showed evidence of this trend. Among the advanced-level majoring students, just over 90% of the U.S. respondents were studying full time, compared to 100% of those at the same level in the United Kingdom and only 66.7% in Australia. It was interesting, then, to note the high levels of paid employment recorded by some students. Slightly more than 85% of advanced level majoring students in the United States indicated they were currently undertaking some form of paid work, with 50% recording they were working between 10 and 20 hrs weekly, and 16.2% recording that they worked between 21 and 30 hrs weekly. Lower levels of paid employment were recorded among the U.K. cohorts where 60% recorded no paid work, 20% recorded they were working between 10 and 20 hrs weekly, and 10% that they worked between 21 and 30 hrs. The Australian students' labor market participation appeared to accord with their higher rates of part-time enrolment with 16.7% of this group recording 30 or more hours of paid work a week. Further, among the U.S. respondents, just over 66% at the advanced level and 61% at the entry level recorded at least one parent with post-secondary educational qualifications, compared to 55% at the advanced level and 45% at the entry level in the United Kingdom, and 41% at the advanced level and 40% at the entry level in Australia.

Given these profiles, it is interesting to note the complex and at times contradictory relationships these undergraduates exhibited towards the discourse of vocationalism, and to questions of career and employment more generally. Indeed, the picture that emerges is of a cohort whose decisions to enroll in Women's Studies are rarely informed in the first instance by career and vocational considerations, even though they experience perceptible levels of anxiety concerning their future study-to-work transitions. For example, no more than 5% of students in any of the

Women's Studies programs surveyed selected the option of "career prospects" as the principal motivating factor in their enrolment. The breakdown of the Australian entry-level cohort is indicative of the general pattern of responses recorded here (Table 1).

Across the entire survey cohort, by far the most popular reason for enrolment (generally selected by between 70% and 90% of students at both levels in any program) was "interest in the subject": not an uncommon motivation for subject choice among students enrolled in generalist degrees and one reflected in the control groups from other humanities and social science majors. However, while career issues did not feature prominently in students' initial decisions to enroll in a Women's Studies unit, they nevertheless formed part of the wider context in which they assessed their chosen program of studies, emerging more visibly among entry level students' plans for majoring. The numbers of students enrolled in a first-year Women's Studies unit who planned to go on to major in the field varied from campus to campus with on average 10–20% answering "yes" to majoring and between 20% and 40% reporting they were "undecided." Students selecting "yes" to majoring in Women's Studies generally related their decision directly to their "passion" and "fascination" for the subject. In contrast, while some of those who selected "no" or "undecided" with respect to majoring also sought to explain their decision in terms of their relative satisfaction levels, a significant minority of students wrote explicitly in terms of seeing "no career prospects" flowing from Women's Studies or of being unable to discern what "career options" the major might offer. As one such student observed, "I don't know where this will take me." When asked to rate the

Table 1  
Main reason for enrolling in Women's studies

(a) I was interested in the subject matter	72.6%
(b) Friends or acquaintances recommended Women's Studies to me	2.1%
(c) I had studied gender/feminist issues at school	0%
(d) It was a compulsory unit for my course of study	0%
(e) Family members suggested this area of study to me	2.1%
(f) I thought it would be easy	2.1%
(g) I thought it would complement my other studies	9.5%
(h) I thought it would enhance my career prospects	2.1%
(i) Other	8.4%
No response	1.1%

significance for their future careers of the skills and knowledge developed in women's studies in contrast to their other area of concentration, newly enrolled students in each national domain uniformly indicated that they believed their second subject area offered greater career potential for them. 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 vocational potential of different subjects might ultimately have on students' likelihood of choosing to continue in a program. And the responses here seem to suggest that while career issues are not necessarily a pressing factor for those opting to major, they could well be a factor for those choosing not to.

One question asked students to rate their family's response to their Women's Studies enrolment on a scale from "supportive" through to "hostile." It was heartening to find that levels of hostility were uniformly low across all national domains. In the U.S. cohorts, for example, almost 95% of students at both entry and advanced levels selected the options of "supportive," "curious," or "neutral," with the numbers of those reporting "supportive" family responses increasing from 31% at the entry level to over 50% in higher years. Similar results appeared in the Australian and U.K. cohorts where over 90% of students regarded their family's attitude as "supportive," "curious," or "neutral," with both entry level and later-year students reporting "supportive" family responses in the range of 48–50%. Yet, at the same time, there was evidence suggesting these students still felt obliged to explain and/or justify their enrolment choice in light of popular perceptions of the major's supposedly limited vocational appeal. These pressures should not be underestimated given that more than 50% of the students in each domain were pursuing their studies with significant financial support from families or partners and, as Johanna Wyn has noted, today investment in higher education is frequently characterized as an intergenerational one where "education becomes a kind of bargain between parents and their children, and failure means not just personal failure, but letting the family down" (Wyn, 2000, p.67). "They thought of it as an interesting subject but compared it to 'basket-

weaving'," one student reported of her parents, while another noted hers were supportive "despite a preference for something more career oriented." Others recounted less benign responses: "My father wouldn't pay for my education any longer, so I transferred to where I could pay for it myself." Distinct hierarchies among different fields were repeatedly invoked: "They see 'sociology' as more acceptable," "Women's Studies is regarded by them as not a 'proper' subject"; "[they're] only interested in valid vocational study options," "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." These types of attitudes were frequently linked to perceptions that as a field Women's Studies was "esoteric," "narrow," or "separatist": something one might dabble in, but not take seriously because it represented a poor choice with respect to their futures. These concerns appeared to arise from the assumption that the field was not "real" (or as "real" as other possible majors) and was therefore, in the words of another student, unable to "provide a good background and basis for [a] career."

In considering the students' responses, it is possible to identify on the one hand elements of the same "complex cost-benefit analysis" Price and Owen (1998, pp. 190–91) reported among their interviewees as they weighed their awareness of the field's problematic status against possible instrumental and affective outcomes from studying Women's Studies. On the other hand, responses from the current survey may also 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." As Du Bois-Reymond (1998, p.66) observes, unlike their parents' generation who valued predictability of actions and developments within the life course, many younger people now 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. However, we choose to interpret them, the strategic or flexible ways in which these students approach their degree studies may in fact turn out to be less "risky" than the

types of educational behaviors routinely endorsed by those invested in dominant understandings of what it means to “think vocationally.” In short, many of these students’ anxieties may be misplaced. Researchers examining education and youth policy point to the growing limitations of a narrowly “instrumental education” in a deregulated labor market characterized by shifting occupational boundaries and rapid technological change, and where demands for highly skilled workers are made against a background of increasing unemployment and underemployment for graduates. As Yates (2000) argues, continuing to encourage students’ selection of a single prescribed pathway solely because of its imagined utility for future work may be out of step with the current environment where a more flexible approach to post-school education and pathways is needed. Pointing to boys’ greater tendency in schooling to focus intently on a specific pathway or qualification, while girls in contrast follow their interests with less regard for strategic outcomes, Yates makes the argument that the latter attitude may now prove more effective beyond school. “It may be,” she observes, “that the changing form of the economy alters the relative pay off of these processes” (Yates, 2000, p. 154).

### But what will they think?

Despite their general sensitivity to career and employment issues and palpable pressures concerning the desirability of making “good” choices and selecting “vocational” pathways, the majority of surveyed students seemed confident in establishing their own priorities when it came to their degree studies. But even those who elected to major and appeared most keen to resist negative constructions of their chosen subject were not unaffected by them. They evidently held their own related concerns about the subject’s status and struggled for a language with which to respond to those types of charges. For example, a small number of the U.K. majoring students indicated frustration that the subject in which they themselves were passionately interested was generally not “highly regarded” and, in their experience, did not appear to share the same value—either inside or outside the academy—as other humanities and social science subjects. A few also expressed the wish that the field

could have another, more “impressive” title, while others worried specifically about the fact that it did not appear regularly in the recruitment information and job advertisements they saw. This latter point was, in fact, addressed by one of the career advisers interviewed. While she agreed that few recruitment advertisements would actually specify Women’s Studies, she felt that there were ultimately plenty of potential openings for Women’s Studies graduates:

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. . .

The clear message was that it was up to Women’s Studies graduates to imagine, identify, and forge their own pathways, but in common with many generalists, it is likely that some Women’s Studies students are actively “selecting themselves out” of potential employment opportunities by making narrow assumptions about their “place” (or that of Women’s Studies) in the labor market. Of even greater concern, however, is the finding that in each national domain, significant numbers of students—increasing at the advanced level—held explicit concerns as to how prospective employers might view Women’s Studies. The following breakdown of responses for advanced level majoring students shows these concerns to be especially marked in the U.K. and U.S. cohorts (Table 2).

I would argue that these results correlate closely with the students’ concerns about misperceptions surrounding the major. For example, in response to a separate question, between 75% and 85% of the same students indicated that they believed the general community’s understanding of the major to be either “inaccurate” or “highly inaccurate.” Stefanie Thomas in her autobiographical account of studying Women’s Studies perceptively notes that while “common

Table 2  
Do you ever worry that Women’s Studies may be perceived negatively by prospective employers?

	USA	UK	AUST
(a) All of the time	1.6%	15%	3.6%
(b) Sometimes	59.4%	45%	28.6%
(c) Not at all	23.4%	25%	42.9%
(d) Haven’t thought about it	14.1%	15%	17.9%
No response	1.5%	–	7%

stereotypical impressions” of Women’s Studies students (and feminists) generally derive from “ignorance,” it is ultimately Women’s Studies students who “carry the weight of the ignorance” in routine interactions (Thomas, 2001, p.16). While not disputing Thomas’ assessment, I would nevertheless argue that the interviews conducted with employers suggest at least some of survey cohorts’ anxieties could be inflated and that we would do well to address this issue with our own students.

It is true that few of the employers interviewed revealed any detailed knowledge of Women’s Studies as a field of specialization, but in the larger context of their recruiting practices, this appeared less troubling than the students anticipated. As one careers adviser observed, lack of knowledge of a particular field was not remarkable in itself as the range of disciplines now pursued within generalist degrees is extremely varied and potential employers frequently lack familiarity with many subjects. “If they are a graduate themselves then it was 20 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.” Given this, it also follows that they may not automatically recognize the same distinctions and hierarchies among disciplines that so concerned the students and their families. While no explicitly negative responses to Women’s Studies as an area of academic endeavor were elicited from interviewees, potential problems associated with the general lack of awareness or understanding of the field were raised. 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 Women’s Studies could prompt potential employers to make recourse to a range of familiar, if somewhat inaccurate, gender stereotypes in assessing the field. In particular, several interviewees reported their suspicion that workplaces that 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 Women’s Studies major as someone who was “bolshy” or “politically correct” and who may not fit

easily into the prevailing workplace culture. And, interestingly, one graduate recalled how, shortly after she started a new job, colleagues had sheepishly confessed to her that they found her “different” and “nicer” than they’d expected given her Women’s Studies background! An employer from the travel and tourism industry admitted harboring some of the same notions herself before returning to university and enrolling in a graduate Women’s Studies program:

before [doing the course] I would have thought [Women’s Studies graduates] were going to be . . . lefty, “pinko” and giving me a hard time over all these business things that we’ve got to do, and have ethical problems with everything we do. They might be a bit difficult to manage. I now realize that that isn’t the case. I think there is a need for repositioning in the minds of employers in terms of Women’s Studies graduates.

She 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:

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 center. You won’t be suitable for me.” Whereas that’s not the case at all.

It was also suggested that Women’s Studies’ 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 major itself. In this scenario, the positive vocational attributes Women’s Studies programs may foster by way of transferable personal and professional skills could be in danger of being overlooked in the race to generalize about the apparently “nonvocational” nature of such degrees.

In contrast to these reported attitudes, however, a different range of responses was elicited from interviewees in the community sector and NGO area. Here Women’s Studies 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 Women's Studies 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 Women's Studies major 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 major in this context. This diverse range of responses from employers was reflected in one graduate's account of her job-seeking experiences. Initially advised by a placement agency that she'd get further if she "played down the women's thing," this particular graduate found herself several years (and several jobs) later being interviewed by a manager who lamented she did not have more Women's Studies graduates like her to hire. Evidently no singular or uniform "employer response" can be assumed and, as I elaborate below, students need to be encouraged to think tactically about how they present themselves and their studies in these encounters.

### **Skills, knowledge, and the Women's Studies experience**

Since the majority of employers could not be expected to have a detailed and current working knowledge of all humanities and social science subjects, employers and careers advisers consistently stressed that the responsibility ultimately rested with Women's Studies graduates to explain their major in

ways that employers can grasp: "the onus is on the student or the graduate to demonstrate the relevance of the study they have done" or "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 Women's Studies, 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. That said, it is worth noting that this sample of careers advisers and employers did not reflect the view—so central to the dominant discourse of vocationalism—that post-graduation career opportunities necessarily depended upon a particularly close connection between field of study and the employment opening sought. Indeed, employers and career advisers alike argued that graduate applicants with generalist degrees were rarely assessed solely in terms of what appeared on their 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 personal qualities of the individual together with their skill base. The majority of employers who saw themselves recruiting generalist graduates were far more interested in applicants' transferable personal and professional skills 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). This point was also reinforced by graduates who insisted that, in their experience, degree labels were of negligible importance compared to their ability to identify problems and challenges and work through them effectively. In the words of one of the career advisers, students undertaking any humanities or social science major 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."

Based on the survey findings, a significant number of the Women's Studies students surveyed were actually moving towards interpreting their studies in just this way, giving weight to both the knowledge

and skills components of a Women's Studies education and seeing these as holding considerable utility for future work. A common perception among the students surveyed was that Women's Studies provided them with more of the "how" than the "what" when it came to career and workplace issues. That is to say, beyond knowledge of feminism and gender issues, it offered them important ways to read and negotiate systems, ideologies, and power structures. As one student so aptly phrased it, Women's Studies gave her the "ability to see through bullshit." Several of the graduates confirmed the efficacy of these observations, reflecting that their Women's Studies education 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 undergraduates about where Women's Studies 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 Women's Studies to workplace settings was easily answered: she used the insights generated in her Arts degree and specifically from Women's Studies "every day." Countering the view that material explored in Women's Studies held limited workplace application, several graduates indicated this material provided valuable resources for managing workplace issues like sexual harassment, while 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 Women's Studies takes gender as its key critical axis, they had also developed their awareness of other equity flashpoints, such as racial discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantage. They argued that these insights were crucial to their current professional or educational activities, mirroring the

graduates profiled in Luebke and Reilly who reflected that—irrespective of their career trajectory—Women's Studies "made them better at what they have done since graduation" (Luebke & Reilly, 1995, p.199). They confidently critiqued those narrowly technical definitions of the "vocational" promulgated in the academy, demonstrating a strong awareness that labor 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 Women's Studies was "mickey mouse" or unrelated to the "real world."

In response to specific questions, the surveyed undergraduates showed that they were capable of identifying potential career benefits to be derived from the subject and of devising their own understandings of what might constitute the "vocational" returns from this particular program of study. The most frequently listed benefits 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. Table 3, showing results from advanced-level students at one U.K. campus, is broadly representative of the types of responses given.

As Table 3 shows, beyond the specific knowledge gained from their studies, the students placed a significant emphasis on transferable personal and professional skills (communication skills, team working, creativity, verbal reasoning) as holding key career benefits for them. As one respondent wrote, "I hope to go into H[uman] R[esources] where these skills will be useful." This mode of interpreting their studies is significant given that both labor market analysts and

Table 3

Summary: Name three things you hope to have gained from Women's Studies that will help you get a job after you graduate

Women's issues/social knowledge	88.9%
Communication/group skills	44.4%
Writing/research/analytical skills	33.3%
General knowledge	33.3%
Personal growth/confidence	33.3%

Percentages add up to more than 100% as respondents provided more than one answer.

the career advisers and employers interviewed for this study suggest that in future, it will be broad sets of competencies 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 Service, 1996, p. 15). While it could be argued that the skill sets identified here in relation to Women's Studies are similar to those articulated in relation to many programs of study within the humanities and social sciences, one quite crucial difference emerged. In contrast to the control groups in other programs of study, majoring students across the Women's Studies cohort consistently identified "confidence," "assertiveness," "self-worth," or "determination" among the key vocational attributes deriving from Women's Studies. This was sometimes expressed in abstract terms as "the confidence to do anything" or "completing this course has given my identity more strength and purpose," and occasionally quite specifically as "confidence as a woman in the workplace." Positive attitudinal change (e.g., "increased open-mindedness" or "awareness") also rated highly. In the words of one mature-age student, "I wish to change career and do something for myself. . . Women's Studies has helped me formulate my thinking." No parallel qualities were identified by any of the control groups. This particular finding complements trends identified in other research that indicates that Women's Studies staff and students understand personal transformation as a legitimate and valuable outcome of both curriculum and pedagogy (see, e.g., Griffin 1998; Lovejoy 1998). But it also suggests that one benefit of this research might be the fostering—among teachers and students—of a more detailed understanding of the ways in which 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, p.29).

Table 4  
I view the knowledge and skills I develop in Women's Studies as

Advanced level students	USA	UK	AUST
(a) Central to my later career plans	73.4%	40%	39.3%
(b) Of some importance to my later career plans	23.4%	50%	53.6%
(c) Unrelated to my later career plans	1.6%	10%	3.6%
No response	1.6%	—	3.5%

Asked whether the skills and knowledge developed through Women's Studies were "central," "of some importance" or "unrelated" to their future career plans, 73.4% of the U.S. 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 U.K. cohort recorded lower ratings for "central" (around 40%), each still recorded around 50% of students selecting "of the some importance" as Table 4 shows.

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 women's studies 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 women's studies offered useful "background knowledge" or that "knowledge of gender relations is always useful to have." These figures contrast markedly with those of the entry level students where, for example, only 10.9% of the U.S. cohort considered the knowledge and skills they developed in women's studies to be "central" to their career plans, suggesting that those students who progressed to majors developed a greater sense both of their own career pathways and of the possible applications of Women's Studies to them.

## Conclusions

As I noted at the outset, for Women's Studies practitioners, the process of engaging with vocational discourses and outcome measures in the current educational climate is a complex and potentially conflicted one. But such conflicts are not necessarily new to us. As Berenice Malka Fisher has observed, teaching in Women's Studies has always meant teaching through "a double lens," balancing being "part of a system of higher education that claims to help students succeed in society" with being "part of a social movement aimed at challenging and changing the current social order" (Fisher, 2001, p. 27). Are there not, then, important practical, political, and pedagogic reasons why feminist practitioners should stress that their brief indeed extends to critical engagements with

the “vocational,” at the same time as we strive to challenge what is entailed in such a term? And is it not the case that as professionals in this field, we have an obligation to understand and engage critically with what is arguably a significant element in the broader social and political positioning of our work in Women’s Studies? I would suggest that how practitioners engage with the discourse of “vocational relevance” without ceding key arguments for social change in how a term like “vocational” is understood is an important question for the field of Women’s Studies. In seeking answers to this question, I believe that we may, as Nikki Le Feuvre (2002, p. 121) suggests, “just have more to gain than lose in the long term.” Indeed, it is likely that if practitioners cannot articulate a definition of “vocational” learning that encompasses what we see as the distinct benefits of Women’s Studies programs for students, at the same time as challenging prevailing definitions of the “vocational” that exclude broader understandings of the relationships between career success and the types of skills and attributes developed in programs like ours, we risk being marginalized in ways that will limit our capacity to intervene in crucial debates about the future shape of higher education and the place of Women’s Studies within it.

This study has sought to examine how “vocational” discourse operates for Women’s Studies students, for graduates, and for potential employers. The data gathered here from students, graduates, and employers suggests that not to engage actively with the discourse of vocationalism is to ignore a critical aspect of the ongoing development of the field of Women’s Studies and its continuing struggle for legitimacy, neither of which can be separated from debates on the status of women both inside and outside the academy. It 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. Bringing explicit discussion of such pressures and imperatives within our educational frameworks is one way in which we can challenge the prevailing definitions of the “vocational” that circulate within our systems of higher education, definitions that currently enjoy the status of seeming truths. Such a challenge would not simply entail pushing the boundaries of current definitions of the “vocational” by invoking research on the changing nature of labor market conditions and on the increas-

ingly uncertain relationship between higher education and specific employment outcomes. It would also mean examining the processes by which our students come to understand different fields as “vocational,” “useful,” or “applied,” and hopefully allaying some of the evident confusion and anxiety numbers of them experience on this front.

The findings here would seem to indicate that there are numerous ways in which Women’s Studies practitioners can usefully engage with the prevailing discourses of vocationalism without playing the sorts of games that the field was established to interrogate. If we refigure definitions of “vocational” to reflect new labor market paradigms and relate these new definitions to pedagogical practice and the multiple aims of the field of Women’s Studies, as our graduate cohort was able to do, we may be able to reposition Women’s Studies inside the “vocational” discourses of the academy, while simultaneously contesting the rigidity of the conventional deployments of those discourses. 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 Women’s Studies programs, we are indeed particularly well equipped to mediate and participate in these challenges with our students. In this new model, the vocational value of Women’s Studies may be found precisely in those factors that originally excluded it from serious consideration in the older framing of “vocational pathways.”

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> An example is the employment consultant quoted in a major Australian daily newspaper on her apparent difficulty placing a recent Women's Studies graduate. "There is just no job", she argued. "They are not taking someone with that sort of esoteric major" (Armitage, 1998, p. 2). For similar media characterizations of the field's vocational potential, see McCamish (1999). A general discussion of media images of Women's Studies can be found in McDermott (1995).

<sup>2</sup> This scenario was certainly borne out in research carried out in 1998 by a group of Monash University undergraduate students who conducted a survey of approximately 100 members of the public in which 'women's health' was commonly selected as the most accurate description of the Women's Studies course.

<sup>3</sup> Currently in Australia, for example, higher education graduates have approximately half the unemployment rate that applies to the workforce as a whole (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1999, p. 5).

<sup>4</sup> For further information on this project, see [www.hull.ac.uk/eusi](http://www.hull.ac.uk/eusi).

<sup>5</sup> For details of the pilot study, see Dever, Cuthbert and Pollak (2002).

<sup>6</sup> These institutions were Monash University, University of Sydney, Flinders University, and Victoria University in Australia; Lancaster University, University of Hull, and the University of Surrey, Roehampton, in the UK; and Duke University, Ohio State University, University of California Irvine, University of Southern Maine, and Washington State University in the United States. Efforts were made to ensure that in each national domain the programs targeted were geographically dispersed, represented both large and small institutions, research-focused and teaching-focused institutions and, in the United States, a mix of public and private institutions.

<sup>7</sup> The difference in the size of the survey pools at the entry and advanced levels is not indicative of different response rates, but of the enrolment "pyramid" that is common to Women's Studies programs. Despite large numbers of students "sampling" Women's Studies at the entry level, the numbers of students continuing on to majors is often comparatively small, approximately 10–20% of the original cohort. In most instances, the survey was administered during regular class time and response rates were generally very high for both groups.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to my colleague JaneMaree Maher who conducted these interviews and contributed the analysis and thematizing of the original data.

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