

IT and Women: No interest or Direction

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During 2004 an exploratory, descriptive study was carried out with the aim to investigate the gender imbalance within the Information Technology (IT) industry in New Zealand.

Over the past six years, the number of female enrolments on the Universal College of Learning's (UCOL) Information Systems programmes has remained consistently low and seems to be continually decreasing with research showing that this gender imbalance in IT is a worldwide phenomenon. A search of the literature was conducted to gather information regarding possible reasons for this imbalance and the low participation of females in the IT industry and programmes of tertiary study in this area. This information has helped to provide a balanced picture of industry and educational trends.

A sample of currently enrolled UCOL female and male students were involved in focus groups which helped to explore why they made the decision to study or not study in the IT discipline, and to gain personal perspectives and experiences. Other Polytechnics and Institutes of Technology throughout New Zealand were also questioned using a mail out questionnaire in order to gather information regarding female vs male enrolment levels within their institution, and to also gather personal perceptions as educators on female participation in IT.

The data from the questionnaire and focus groups was analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Statistical results from the questionnaire indicate that this imbalance is occurring on a nation-wide basis as the international literature indicates. Thematic analysis results from the questionnaire and focus groups reveal the emergence of common themes in rela-

tion to perceptions of why female participation is low. The two main themes that became apparent were 'direction' and 'interest'. The themes are not mutually exclusive and have the potential to influence each other: if correct 'direction' is provided to females regarding the IT industry, ultimately this should lead to more 'interest' and an increase in the gender balance and increased diversity in the workplace.

It is clear that women are becoming or remain increasingly under-represented in Information Technology and that it is evident that women have a significant contribution to make within this discipline. Female role modelling has been identified as an excellent way to encourage females into IT in both education and the industry itself in order to dispel many of the misperceptions about the industry. This research has been a preliminary, localised study based within the polytechnic arena. A broader study would include gathering statistics and perspectives from industry and universities. Further research could help to identify how best to formulate a strategy of promotion and direction using role modelling in an attempt to reverse the gender imbalance in IT study that is occurring on a national level in tertiary level courses at polytechnics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Why should a study of female participation in the IT industry be of interest? One of the main benefits that management literature sees is diversity as the basis of opportunities for competitive advantage. Arguments to support this view cover

