



**DR ANNA BORG**

*Senior Lecturer, Centre for Labour Studies*

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### **The Gender, Work and Society Diploma Course: Its Impact and Way Forward**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on the Diploma in Gender, Work and Society. Using data from a tracer study conducted in early 2023, with the last four cohorts of graduates, it was revealed that the course largely attracted mature women who are in paid employment. When assessing the impact of the course on past students, the study revealed that it had a positive impact on their personal and professional development, with many citing benefits in both areas. Their increased awareness of gender issues also helped them in their parental roles and in their relationships with others. The course clearly served as a springboard and motivated many of the course graduates to continue studying. The past students made several suggestions on how to improve the course. On reflection, the course clearly needs to attract more men and

younger women and needs to be restructured to reflect the push for online learning in a post Covid environment.

**Keywords:** tracer study; gender course; mature students; impact; suggestions.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1994, the Workers' Participation Development Centre (WPDC), as the Centre for Labour Studies (CLS) was formerly known, launched its first certificate course in Women's Studies. This course was ground breaking for its time and garnered a strong interest. In the following year, it was turned into a two-year part-time Diploma. Nearly 3 decades later, the revised course, is still running as a Diploma in Gender, Work and Society and is offered in collaboration with the Faculty for Social Wellbeing.

The multidisciplinary content of the Diploma Course seeks to sensitise participants about the importance of gender as a transversal theme. It enables students to analyse various subjects through the gender lens including issues related to work, sociology, psychology, social policy, politics, law, economics, health, culture, and poverty among others. After completing the course successfully, students are able to join the third year of the Bachelor in Work and Human Resources (Honours) course, which is also offered by the Centre for Labour Studies.

Since its inception, the course has attracted about 200 students. A tracer study with seven different cohorts of graduates (1997, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2011, and 2013) was conducted in 2013. The results of this study showed that the vast majority of our graduates had extremely positive remarks about the course, and many claimed that it had helped them in multiple ways. In 2023, a new tracer study was conducted with the last four cohorts of students who graduated from this course between 2011 and 2021. In total, these amounted to 65 students. These were contacted by email and telephone between March and April 2023 in order to assess the impact that the course had on their

professional and personal life. 68% of those contacted, participated in this study which included both quantitative and qualitative questions.

## **DEMOGRAPHICS**

Being one of the few part-time morning Diplomas offered at the University of Malta, the course has largely attracted mature female students who generally enter through the Adult Learner clause. Men made up less than 5% of the student population in the last four cohorts. This is not an exception, but the general rule. Currently, the majority of graduates fall in the 40-55 age bracket and only 7% are under 40 or younger.

Just over 70% of the graduates are in employment, with the majority being in full-time work (57%) which fully matches their expectations (52%). However, 10% of the respondents are not happy with their current job. Of those employed, 54% work in the Public Sector with the three biggest cohorts working in the Educational, Social, and Public administration fields. For nearly a third of the graduates the Diploma was a requirement for their job.

## **THE IMPACT OF THE COURSE ON THE GRADUATES**

Apart from the closed-ended questions in the study, the graduates were asked two open-ended questions. The first was to assess how the Diploma in Gender, Work and Society had impacted them at the personal and professional level, whilst the second question was in relation to suggestions on how the course could be improved. I shall discuss the impact that the course had on our graduates first.

### **THE IMPACT AT THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LEVEL**

When asked about the impact of the course, it immediately becomes clear that first and foremost the course had a significant impact on the graduates at the personal level. Many commented that the course broadened their perspectives and opened their minds. One of the female graduates remarked:

*Your mind opens up and you start realising certain things. So personally it was really helpful. I felt like I grew up.*

Likewise, another student commented:

*It has improved my judgement both professionally and personally - e.g. when watching the news, and so on.*

Some of the graduates noted that the course increased their awareness about gender stereotypes and existing inequalities between women and men that previously may have gone by undetected. A male respondent remarked:

*Personally, as a man with certain privileges, I wouldn't have experienced certain things directly, so I realised what women go through in their everyday lives, and how it also indirectly affects men; it also influenced me in my personal life, because it made me a lot more aware and conscious of the world around me.*

Many of the respondents noted that the course enabled them to gain new skills and increased their self-confidence. They mentioned that thanks to the course they became more critical and analytical in their observations of the world around them. One of the graduates reiterated that now:

*On a personal level, I am able to perceive and understand better people's perceptions of common matters. I distinguish certain weaknesses among my friends vis a vis understanding of news, and fake news, without [them] doing the proper research.*

The skills mentioned by the graduates include time management, public speaking and how to research specific topics. Many noted that the course brought them multiple benefits at the personal level. Some of the students noted that they were able to use the skills gained in their professional roles at work too. For example, they did so when writing up policies for their place of work or drafting a Gender Equality Policy. A graduate who works in the health sector summed up the impact of the course by saying:

*...it helped my professional life as I carry out training and lecture on gender and health and in my personal life as I developed critical thinking. It helped a lot to make 'gender' issues more prominent within the health system.*

Similarly, a graduate who now works in the HR field remarked that the course:

*Professionally, it helped me to understand and listen to employees as individuals - their backgrounds, the way they act, etc. I was always that person who tried to understand, but I think that the Diploma opened my views and helped.*

So overall, many of the students felt that the course helped them both at the personal and professional level with many citing benefits in both areas.

## **HELPING THE GRADUATES IN THEIR PARENTING ROLES**

Whilst the course helped many past students to grow at the personal and professional level and to gain new skills, the impact seems to extend to other members of their families. For example, some of the past students noted that their increased awareness of gender inequalities encouraged them to move away from traditional norms and stereotyping at home:

*Even with my children, I try not to be too stuck on stereotypes, and I try to make them aware and accepting of differences.*

One of the parents said that her children are gay, and the course allowed her to relate more to them. She reiterated that:

*If I were not informed about certain things, I might have more difficulty understanding their views as a mother - because when I was young, we were not educated on this. My daughter's friends tell her she is very lucky to have such an understanding mother.*

This is a positive aspect of the course that is rarely discussed when thinking of its impact.

## **A SPRINGBOARD TO CONTINUE THE ACADEMIC JOURNEY**

One of the most positive aspects of the course is that it served as a launching pad for many of the past students to further their studies. When looking at all the course graduates, 41% secured other qualifications since completing the course, and nearly a third are currently continuing their studies at the tertiary level, with the majority doing so at Master level. When probed whether they are interested in furthering their studies, 60% replied in the positive with the majority opting to follow the Bachelor in Work and Human Resources course.

When looking at the qualitative answers supplied by the graduates, it seems that the multidisciplinary aspect of the course allows the students to decide which subjects were more suited for them before they continued their academic journey. For example, one of the female students commented that the course:

*Gave me a number of directions I could take academically. Gave me the opportunity to establish the subjects that I was more suited for. Gave me a start to my academic journey.*

Another female graduate who was previously inactive in the labour market noted that:

*The Diploma has basically opened my academic path to further my studies in the Management sector and also it helped me in returning to the Labour market after an absence of several years due to raising my family.*

Hence the course seems to serve as a useful stepping stone that allows the students to get a taste of academic life and once they prove their abilities, many are motivated to continue their academic journey.

After looking at the impact of the course on the graduates, in the final section of this study I will discuss what they had to say in relation to how the course could be improved.

## **SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO IMPROVE THE DIPLOMA COURSE**

Several students seemed happy with the course in its current format and remarked that they would leave it as it is, even if some found it to be quite intense and challenging, especially at the beginning. For example, one of the past students said:

*The course is quite intense, and I found it extremely interesting. I would not change anything.*

However, there were several others who had suggestions, the most common one being to extend the course to a degree.

*I think for all the time we spent on the assignments we did, we could have done it at degree level. It felt like the equivalent of a degree level. It was the same but shorter*

*and involved smaller amounts of work, but at the same level.*

On a similar note, another student reiterated that:

*The Diploma was very intensive. An upgrade to a degree should be considered.*

Apart from a common thread to upgrade the Diploma course to a degree, several students spoke about the challenges they face when they are given group work and the lack of fairness when students piggyback on others and do less work.

Others commented that when a unit has multiple assessments it becomes more difficult to manage especially if they also work full time. Considering that some students are studying whilst working and raising a family, it was suggested that employees who want to invest in their education should be relieved from work when attending such courses. There were suggestions to link the course better to Human Resources, although some students wanted less HR content.

A number of students suggested that the course takes on a more practical approach and would for example include visits to shelters for women in prostitution and women experiencing violence. The idea is to allow the students to do voluntary work with NGOs and other institutions which are working to improve women's lives.

*I believe there should also be a unit or allocated credits for students to do some sort of voluntary work during the course. I think this activity will raise awareness and continue opening their eyes; it would also open doors for the students.*

A male graduate proposed that more effort should be made to attract more men to the course because they too are struggling due to gender stereotypes. Furthermore, he argued that in order to close inequalities between women and men, more men need to become aware of existing inequalities between women and men through such a course:

*We need to get more men to apply for this course, because without their help things are not going to change for women, and for themselves too because I think they're struggling as well.*

There were other random but interesting suggestions like, for example, changing the name of the course, and to open the course in the evening and adding an online option for students to do the course remotely.

## **CONCLUSION**

This tracer study shows that the impact of the Diploma Course on our past students is significant and positive to a large extent. It is also encouraging to see so many of our graduates continuing their studies after the course. Looking at the suggestions, the time may be ripe to explore ways of improving the course and finding ways to attract more men and younger students to it. In a post-Covid environment, it is also important to seek ways of making the course accessible to many others through remote learning.

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