‘WE WERE AT THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING’

THE FIRST WOMEN STUDENTS AND GRADUATES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

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The stated vision of The University of Queensland was that it would be a university for all Queenslanders. The number of women students, however, remained very much in the minority throughout the university’s early decades. This essay focuses on the women who entered the university during this period. These women did not enter the violent and hostile environment that some women students experienced in Britain, however, their experiences and expectations did differ from their male counterparts. Through shared experience many female students developed strong bonds that continued after graduation. In the early decades of the twentieth century women’s employment options were severely limited with most graduates entering the teaching profession. Despite these restrictions, university women developed a strong sense of privilege for having received a university education and felt they should utilise their knowledge and skills to make a significant contribution to the community. This sense of privilege was a motivating factor behind the formation of graduate women’s organisations internationally. In 1920 The University of Queensland Women Graduates’ Association was established to provide a supportive and stimulating space for graduate women in Queensland. The organisation still exists today as the Australian Federation of University Women, Queensland.

In 1911 the newly-established University of Queensland accepted its first cohort of eighty-three students, twenty-three of whom were women. Hilda Cleminson (née Brotherton) was one of these first students and in her memoirs, written in the late 1960s, she reflected that ‘it was such an interesting and exciting experience to be in at the beginning of things, and we, first students, had the unique responsibility of establishing traditions for those who came after us.’1 These feelings of enthusiasm and excitement towards the new experiences offered by university study were common among university women in the early decades of the twentieth century. This essay examines the experiences of the women who entered, and graduated from, The University of Queensland during its early years up until the Second World War. It argues that although these women were small in number and their experiences did not escape the gendered social conventions of the time, their education instilled within them a sense of privilege and knowledge that they were contributing to the new university and gaining skills for the betterment of society. One of the ways their contribution was made was through the formation of organisations and networks that extended beyond Queensland to the rest of Australia and internationally. Graduates gained skills and confidence through university study, which instilled a belief that it was imperative for

1. “Memoir, c. 1908–1968,” Hilda Brotherton Papers (University of Queensland, Fryer Library 130), 112. Hereafter University of Queensland, Fryer Library will be abbreviated as UQFL.

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them to come together to work for the betterment of society, particularly in relation to the position of
women. It was through their organisation into the Federations of University Women that many graduate
women believed this aim would be served most effectively.

From its beginnings The University of Queensland was established with a vision as a university
of all Queenslanders. In June 1911 a formal ceremony was held to mark the opening of The University
of Queensland. This official inauguration of the university took place in front of delegates from British
and American universities and the first Chancellor, Sir William Macgregor, outlined in his speech the
aims and policies of the new university:

To the former idea that the University was the most potent agent in imparting higher education, and in forming
the character of the élite of citizens, there has now been added the belief that the University, no longer a class
or caste school, is a great centre for research, and for training men to carry out research and seek after truth on
modern scientific lines; in short, that the University prepares men and women for the highest duties in the social,
political, and industrial life of the State.2

The Chancellor’s speech indicated that women were viewed by authorities as part of the new university,
which would prepare its graduates to take up positions in all aspects of public life. Although women
were able to join the university cohort, there was some segregation in daily student life. For example, in
1912 the senate decided that male and female students should have separate common rooms and these
rooms provided a place for students to meet and have lunch and tea. Universities also recognised the
economic imperative of enrolling women students, particularly during periods when fees from male
students decreased, such as during the First and Second World Wars.3 At The University of Queensland
numbers of female students, however, did not grow at a rapid rate, and in 1922 just 118 undergraduates,
including forty-one women, matriculated.4

Many of the studies that have documented the experiences of women who entered universities in
the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have revealed that, being a minority in the university
community, women students encountered hostility and in many cases were excluded from student
unions and campus societies and activities.5 Margaret Gillett, whilst acknowledging that universities are
complex institutions that have their own separate histories, has identified four distinct, but overlapping,
phases of the history of the university in relation to women. The first phase was characterised by the
exclusion of women from universities. The second phase, beginning in the nineteenth century and
covering the period under examination in this essay, was one where ‘women were gradually and rather
grudgingly allowed to enter the traditional male sanctum.’6 Gillett found that a common theme in the
writings of women students was loneliness. They suffered petty humiliations including ‘booby traps
placed on their seats, graffiti scrawled on classroom walls, and bawdy stories told by instructors.’7 Early
women lecturers also faced hostility and restrictions on their employment. The small number of women
who pursued academic careers in the early decades of the twentieth century were often excluded from

2. The University of Queensland, University of Queensland, 1910–1922 (Brisbane: Government Printer, 1923), 12.
4. The University of Queensland, University of Queensland, 1910–1922.
   Education in the Progressive Era (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Wendy Ann Hubley, To Make Intelligent Beings yet
   More Intelligent: The Canadian Federation of University Women, 1919–1931 (MA thesis, Canada: Carleton University, 1993); Alison
   Mackinnon, The New Women: Adelaide’s Early Women Graduates (Adelaide: Wakefield, 1986); Dorothy Page, “Dissecting a Community:
   Women Medical Students at the University of Otago, 1891–1924,” in Communities of Women: Historical Perspectives, ed.
   Barbara L. Brookes and Dorothy Page (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2002), 111–127; Katie Pickles, “Colonial counterparts:
   Barbara Miller Solomon, In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America (New Haven:
   Yale University Press, 1985).
7. Ibid., 17.
decision making processes within their departments, and they could expect lower rates of pay compared to their male counterparts, and less chance of promotion.8

It is generally considered that women had an easier entry into Australian universities compared to their British counterparts, although it was not without its challenges. Marjorie Theobald puts this relative ease down to local circumstances, as ‘colonial universities were state-funded and therefore vulnerable to the demands of classical liberalism for equity and fair play; they were secular, leaving them free of the clerical influence which kept women out of the Oxbridge colleges.’9 The first degree conferred to a woman in the British Empire was in 1875 at Mount Allison College, New Brunswick, Canada.10 The University of New Zealand awarded its first Bachelor of Arts to a woman in 1877.11 It was not for another five years that an Australian university would award a degree to a woman, when Bella Guerin received a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Melbourne. In 1885 she was followed by Edith Emily Dornwell from the University of Adelaide, and Isola Florence Thompson and Mary Elizabeth Brown, both from the University of Sydney.12

In the last decades of the nineteenth century British women continued to be excluded from full membership of the ancient institutions of Oxford and Cambridge, but their admission was occurring at the newer institutions, such as the University of London, that were officially claiming they made ‘no distinction of sex.’13 Mackinnon argues that the admission of women to the new British universities was relevant to the Australian context as they were intended to cater for the burgeoning middle class.14 This growing class of people in the professions or business and commerce was excluded from Oxbridge because of both social class and religion, and the emerging universities gave them the much desired opportunity to educate their children and secure their class position.15 In Australia, many in the professions held the view that these universities could help to build a new society that distanced itself from notions of entitlement, and provide a university education that would offer subjects useful to a fledgling nation.16

Carol Dyhouse argues that the work of the British Federation of University Women (BFUW), which was established in 1907, was interested with, on one hand, supporting women teachers and students in the universities and, on the other, support for women graduates in their wider public and professional lives.17 Wendy Hubley, in her history of the early years of the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW), argues that the CFUW was one of the successful same-sex volunteer organisations that ‘created a network of women’s support for the postgraduate years which provided the social, political and economic backing of peers.’18 For members of the CFUW, the friendships and networks nurtured by women during their time as students were, in many cases, maintained after graduation.19

Despite the relative ease of the local circumstances and the early achievements of a few, women were still very much in the minority of students pursuing a higher education in the early decades of

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10. Now known as Mount Allison University.
16. Although, as Alison Mackinnon points out, ‘it is clear to us now that the widening of access to education was not really meant to apply to the working class.’ Mackinnon, *The New Women*, 20.
19. Ibid., 10.
the twentieth century. Moreover, tension and conflict did occur regarding the position and status of female students within their institutions and individual degree programmes.20 Dorothy Page’s study of the first fifty medical students at the University of Otago found these women felt they were “venturing into an alien environment.”21 This was an environment where the companionship and mutual support of other women became important. Furthermore, the early examples did not encourage large numbers of women to take up higher education. For instance, only twenty-four women had graduated from the University of Adelaide by 1900.22 University education was undertaken by only a small minority of both young men and women, and in 1921 only 1.4 percent of those aged seventeen to twenty-two were university students in Australia, and up until the mid-1950s student numbers grew slowly.23

Mackinnon found in her study of the early women graduates of the University of Adelaide that women were welcomed by university authorities, but this did not equal a smooth transition into university life free of difficulties.24 Adelaide women experienced “exclusion, ridicule and puerile resistance such as “meat fights” in the anatomy lab and the jibes of the Law Society.”25 Mackinnon argues that the exclusion early University of Adelaide women faced was positively utilised in the formation of clubs that allowed them to build on their skills important to public life such as debating.26 Women’s clubs formed during those early years provided not only opportunities for socialisation and support but a forum in which to debate social issues directly affecting the lives of women. Members of the Adelaide Women Graduates’ Club, established in 1914, regularly met for topical discussion. These debates continued and expanded when the club joined with the Australian Federation of University Women (AFUW) and the International Federation of University Women (IFUW) in the early 1920s.27

Networking was an important and effective element to the operation of many women’s and educational organisations during the inter-war years.28 The mobilisation of graduate women had been occurring internationally in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the influence of counterparts overseas was a vital element in the establishment of graduate organisations in Australia. It was in July 1920 that the first discussions regarding the establishment of a women graduates’ association in Brisbane took place. The formation of such an organisation was prompted by an invitation received by University of Queensland graduates early in 1920 from the BFUW to send delegates to the first IFUW conference in London in July 1920.29 The request from the BFUW highlighted the need for a women graduates’ association in Queensland as one ‘which had been making itself felt for some time.’30 The newly formed association became known as the University of Queensland Women Graduates’ Association (UQWGA)31 and in 1923 its stated aims were:

25. Mackinnon, Love and Freedom, 91. “Meat fights” occurred during dissections when students would cut off parts of the cadaver and throw them at each other.
26. Ibid.
27. Mackinnon, The New Women, 188. The AFUW is now known as the Australian Federation of Graduate Women.
29. The BFUW is now known as the British Federation of Women Graduates.
31. The association exists today as Graduate Women Queensland. In 1966, the association’s name changed from the University of Queensland Women Graduates’ Association (UQWGA) to the Queensland Association of University Women. In 1974, the name Australian Federation of University Women – Queensland was adopted after the AFUW Conference. Finally, the current name was adopted in 2010. I refer to the association as the UQWGA as it was the association’s name for most of the period under consideration in this article.
1) To keep graduate women in touch with one another, and help secure suitable work for graduates.

2) To link up with the International Federation of University Women, thus securing a relationship with the women graduates of every civilised country.32

Only women who held a university degree, or equivalent, were eligible to join the association. The UQWGA, however, was unlike an alumni association, because membership was open to women who were graduates from any university in any country. Although not all members were graduates of the same university they were, nonetheless, bound by the experience of university at a time when only a tiny number of women accessed higher education.

What were the defining experiences of the first women graduates in Queensland? Hilda Cleminson was amongst the first cohort of students at The University of Queensland who began their degrees in 1911. In later years, as a graduate, she took an active role within the UQWGA, including holding positions on the Executive Committee. Hilda Cleminson came from the sort of family Theobald identified as common amongst the first generation of university women, whose fathers often made a living as professionals, managers, clergymen, university men and school teachers.33 Her family was not wealthy, nor had they inherited privilege but her father was a headmaster who saw the value of education for his daughter. She attended Rockhampton Girls’ Grammar School and whilst there dreamed of going to university, but relied on being offered a scholarship due to her family being unable to afford university fees. Cleminson was not alone in her need for a scholarship, as many young women who desired a university education knew that, without financial help from outside the family, university would remain a dream and nothing more.34 At the end of school she missed out on one of only three scholarships available to her for study at the University of Sydney. Cleminson found herself at home assisting her mother with domestic duties, but she remained determined. She considered it great luck that in the year after she left school it was announced that the newly established University of Queensland would accept its first students from the following year. Cleminson studied hard for the University of Queensland scholarship exams and was successful in gaining one of the twenty available scholarships.

A 1959 study of women graduates from The University of Queensland found a significant number of respondents felt that there needed to be more financial assistance for postgraduate study. Many of these women had graduated with an Arts degree, and although they appreciated the value of the broad training it provided, they felt that it did not equip them for any specific occupation and therefore specialisation at the postgraduate level was required. This was particularly significant for women graduates, as such a high percentage of them, especially in the interwar years, graduated with a Bachelor of Arts. It was concluded that, ‘there should be either more liberal provision of postgraduate scholarships or opportunities to extend Commonwealth scholarships for those wishing to qualify for vocations which require training in excess of their first degree course.’35

Obtaining financial support for university study outside of the family was difficult, but a significant number of students, both men and women, proved it was possible. Universities in the interwar years were not necessarily the exclusive domain of the privileged, and not all students came from a background of wealth and privilege that assumed entitlement to a university education.36 The families of many young women had to make financial sacrifices to support them through university in

33. Theobald, Knowing Women, 66.
34. Mackinnon, Love and Freedom, 87.
35. Margaret Wilson Rorke, The Vocational Contributions of Women Graduates of the University of Queensland (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1959), 14. The main purpose of the survey was to examine the contributions of women who graduated from The University of Queensland from the first year of graduations, 1914, up to and including those receiving their degrees in May 1955. By 1955 a total of almost 1300 women had graduated from The University of Queensland and 61% of these participated in the study.
36. Dyhouse, Students; Theobald, Knowing Women.
the hope that a degree would lead to secure and well paid employment. Dyhouse’s study of over 500 women who graduated before 1939 in Britain found that a significant number, just under one third, completed their education with the support of scholarships that bonded them to teaching as a career.37

For some students hard work and ingenuity was required to assemble the necessary money to complete their studies and, furthermore, frugality was required in order to survive. Hilda Cleminson’s honours year in 1914 is an interesting example of the sacrifices made to complete university with few financial resources. Her father was very supportive of his daughter’s education and had assisted her financially during the first three years of her degree. During her honours year, however, her parents were unable to help as they had planned an overseas trip that year and could not afford the expense of both. During the year she lived in the newly established Women’s College at The University of Queensland, and to assist with her finances she had a part-time job teaching at a private school. In addition, she also received a loan from her brother and was awarded a Teacher Training College Scholarship. Of that year she says, ‘I was committed to a strenuous year, teaching every morning at a private school at Auchenflower, back to Teacher Training College for lectures or practical work in the afternoons, and in odd moments working for the honours the following March.’38

Before Cleminson began her university study she had her father’s full support to pursue a university education; however, her mother was initially reluctant to allow her daughter to move to pursue further study in Brisbane as she insisted she needed a daughter at home to assist her with domestic duties. This reticence is contrary to what Mackinnon found common amongst the first generations of university women who were ‘often encouraged by mothers who urged them to seize the new opportunities, opportunities they themselves had lacked.’39 Professor Dorothy Hill, who was a geologist and University of Queensland graduate, remembered when she commenced university in 1925 that there were few examples of university attendance within families to follow when making the decision to go to university:

My family was like most others, in fact 99 per cent of Brisbane families, no university precursors because we didn’t have a university here and the only things people went to university for from Queensland were to become doctors in the south and we were certainly not in that line … I was only one of seven and a girl so I wasn’t all that important!40

When she received a scholarship, Cleminson’s mother’s reticence dissipated. She remembers her mother becoming ‘all a twitter over her undergraduate daughter.’41 She noted the rarity of a young woman attending university in the early decades of the twentieth century and stated that university women ‘were scarce in those days, not two a penny as they are today.’42 When Cleminson first arrived at the university in 1911 she found that it had opened before the planning of courses had been completed and the appropriate equipment had been put in place. In addition, not all the necessary staff had been appointed. In that first year science students experienced a lack of resources in the labs and temporary lecturers. Despite this, she was pleased to be a pioneering student of the university. Cleminson enrolled in a Bachelor of Science, majoring in biology. Female students were in the minority and only a small number of those chose to do science. Although she did not document any direct acts of hostility towards her, Cleminson did at times feel exclusion. She was the only woman in second year chemistry, and although she felt that the Professor always treated her with courtesy, he did not seem to note her presence unless he was reprimanding the group, a habit she came to resent:

37. Dyhouse, Students, 89.
39. Ibid., 83.
42. Ibid.
He never included me in his customary formula of introducing each fresh lecture: ‘We were discussing, gentlemen in our last lecture,’ and so on, following it with a complete review of the previous lecture. However, only when he wished to admonish us for some slight misdemeanour did he appear to remember my presence and begin with, ‘Miss Cleminson and Gentlemen’...

Nevertheless, her memories of university were overwhelmingly characterised by great enthusiasm and excitement at new experiences, both academic and personal. She recalls being part of the beginnings of student associations, and attending a conference in Sydney that ‘held promise of tremendous possibilities of meeting students of other universities as well as older men and women.’ This did not mean, however, that university women were able to escape the gendered social conventions of the time. In her second and third years Cleminson had the opportunity to be part of a field trip to the Barrier Reef, and she notes that the women students were expected to take care of the food and cooking whilst on the trips. In her memoir she does not express any concern about being allocated this task by virtue of being a woman, but instead she accepted that the job would be best done by the female students as they possessed the necessary skills. The excitement of being able to take part in these field trips took precedence. All the students were

aroused to a pitch of enthusiasm by the Doctor’s illustrated books of coral reefs and what we could expect to see and collect, and by the thought of camping out on a practically unknown spot, we all entered whole heartedly into the scheme... Florence Phipps, Hilda Plant and myself, as the senior students were given the task of planning the commissariat, deciding what food to take, and the quantities... the main supervision of cooking and serving the meals would have to be done by us with the help of other students.

Women also experienced restrictions in their daily student life that male students didn’t, such as gaining special permission from their colleges or residences of The University of Queensland if they were to be out late for events such as Commemoration, which was a social highlight of the university calendar. Female students needed to ‘state precisely where they would be and with whom, a requirement that was to survive for more than half century in Women’s College.’ Women’s colleges were seen as an important component in the education of a young university woman. At the second AFUW conference in 1924 it was stated that it was felt unanimously amongst the conference delegates that ‘a greater civic responsibility might be expected from University women, who had had the advantages of mental training and of living a community life within Universities and Colleges.’ The UQWGA acknowledged the role of the Women’s College and supported the college financially, whenever possible, with donations. The influence of Anna Frederica (Freda) Bage, as Principal of the Women’s College and regular UQWGA committee member, may also have been a persuasive force.

Freda Bage is a prominent name in the early records of The University of Queensland, and on 8 February 1914 she was appointed Principal to the newly established Women’s College within the university, and remained in that position until 1946. In early 1923, Bage became the first woman elected to the Senate of The University of Queensland, a position that she held until 1950. This position gave her access to the highest decision making authority in the university. At that time the responsibilities of the Senate were considered to extend beyond the provision of academic training. Malcolm Thomis states that students’ ‘physical and moral well-being was also thought to be the province of the Senate,

44. Ibid., 139.
45. Ibid., 128.
46. Malcolm Thomis, A Place of Light and Learning: The University of Queensland’s First Seventy-Five Years (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985), 49.
which acted with a paternalistic authority that would eventually appear quaint.'\textsuperscript{50} Freda Bage was seen to represent ‘women’s interests’ on the university Senate at a time when women were in the minority as students and in even smaller numbers as academic staff.

Bage graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Science in 1905, and a Master of Science in 1907. Bage’s education afforded her the opportunity of overseas experience when she went to London in 1911 to take up a King’s College research scholarship. It was on her return to Australia that she first moved to Brisbane where she took up an appointment as Senior Demonstrator in biology at The University of Queensland. She became the first woman to take the position of departmental head, albeit as a temporary arrangement, in 1913.\textsuperscript{51} She was involved in numerous women’s organisations including the UQWGA, the Queensland branch of the National Council of Women (NCW), and the Lyceum Club, Brisbane. She also remained involved in the area of her own academic specialty and often took students on field trips as well as being a member of the Barrier Reef Committee and the Field Naturalists’ Club.\textsuperscript{52} In 1948 she was made a life member of the UQWGA, for both her work with the association ‘and for the strong influence she had always exerted on all phases of university life.’\textsuperscript{53} In recognition of her service to the university she received an Honorary Doctor of Laws in 1951.

Hilda Cleminson was a resident of the Women’s College at The University of Queensland, during her honours year. Cleminson was treated to the privileges of a graduate student as she had completed her Bachelor of Science the previous year. Due to this elevated status she came to know Freda Bage well, and remembered her as

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small in stature, young and active mentally and physically ... she was capable, tactful, a good administrator but with sympathy for and an understanding of her charges. Not only did she perform all the duties of Secretary to the Council, the ruling body which was and still is responsible for the financial state of the College, but she also acted as housekeeper, controlling the domestic staff, ordering stores and overseeing all household matters. She coped just as competently with the moral, intellectual, and spiritual welfare of the girls under her care.\textsuperscript{54}
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Cleminson’s comments indicate that the job of Principal was multifaceted. An important element of university education for many women, both graduate and undergraduate, was their experience of the residential college. Women’s colleges were an important part of the participation of women at universities, enabling women from the country such as Cleminson and others the opportunity of ‘suitable’ and convenient accommodation whilst attending university. Mackinnon argues that they were a contributing component of the sense of community that many graduates and professional women developed.\textsuperscript{55} Colleges, however, were more than simply a place to live; they took on a responsibility of education beyond university study and set rules regarding other aspects of a resident’s life.

At the conclusion of her bachelor’s degree, Cleminson believed that her results had never been brilliant, but she passed. However, they were not good enough to pursue her dream of studying medicine. With the dream of medicine gone, she concluded that ‘it looked as if teaching was the only profession for me so I might as well get my hand in.’\textsuperscript{56} Her results were good enough, however, to undertake an honours year which she completed simultaneously with her teaching training. She was not alone in her feelings that teaching was the only career option open to her. In the early decades of the twentieth century most graduate women entered the teaching profession. It was widely acknowledged as an acceptable career path, during a time when women’s options were severely limited. Although graduate women began to enter other professions in small numbers from the last years of the nineteenth century, there was still a gender-based division of labour and women did not enjoy the same status as

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\textsuperscript{50.} Thomis, A Place of Light and Learning, 61.
\textsuperscript{51.} Ibid., 113; Bell, “Bage, Anna Frederika.”
\textsuperscript{52.} Gregory, Vivant Professores, 12–13.
\textsuperscript{53.} “Minutes, Executive Committee, 1 May 1948,” AFUW-Q Papers (UQFL176, Box 2).
\textsuperscript{55.} Mackinnon, Love and Freedom, 141.
\textsuperscript{56.} “Memoir, c. 1908–1968,” Hilda Brotherton Papers (UQFL130), 145.
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men in the world of work. The inclination of women to enter the teaching profession on graduation was reflected in the results of a 1959 study of graduates of The University of Queensland that provides interesting insight into the areas of study that women were undertaking.57

The study by Margaret Rorke revealed that a significant majority of women graduating up to 1940 did so with an Arts degree, and the remainder were generally graduating with Science degrees. Between 1914 and 1939 over 80 per cent of women graduated from the Faculty of Arts. This was partly due to the fact that Arts and Science degrees were practically the only degrees available in the period and that ‘the professions other than teaching were not readily open to women at the time.’58 Although most students graduated with an Arts or Science degree, The University of Queensland was able to offer training in a wide range of professions before the Second World War including engineering, law, medicine, physiotherapy, dentistry, veterinary science and commerce.59 By the 1950s women were graduating from every faculty at the university. However, just over half were in the Faculty of Arts. As the occupational opportunities for women broadened over time, the number of women engaged in teaching decreased. Some of the results of the study were seen to correlate with patterns of change in society. For example, as library facilities began to expand so too did the number of women training in and entering this occupational area.60

The Rorke study also asked questions regarding employment after marriage. During the interwar period marital status was a significant determinant of the ability of women to undertake paid employment. Dominant discourses regarding marriage, which ‘meant for most an abandonment of paid work, support for husband’s career and dedication to children were very rarely publicly questioned until the 1930s.’61 The Rorke study found that graduate women during the interwar years were able to combine employment with marriage and children, but for a majority of respondents this occurred only after the children had completed primary school. Furthermore, a significant number of graduates reported discrimination and lack of opportunity in employment. Comments collected during the study came from diverse areas of employment including medicine and dentistry, clerical professions, education, and specific criticism of the public service and universities for their policy requiring women to resign on marriage.62 About fifteen percent commented on the lack of worthwhile employment opportunities available to them. As one respondent stated, ‘I was discouraged by unsuccessful attempts to find employment in private enterprise.’63

For many women, particularly those denied access to paid employment, voluntary work was a means by which to serve society. The 1920s have often been described as a time when new employment opportunities became available for women, and many women mobilised to consciously become active agents for social change.64 In Queensland, the number of women’s organisations continued to grow, and they worked in their different areas to improve educational standards for women and girls, and to encourage and support women entering public life. This work helped bring improvements and reforms that impacted on the lives of women and girls.65 Indeed, graduate women recognised this need when they established the UQWGA in 1920, with the aim of facilitating contact amongst graduates worldwide.66 Many graduate women became actively involved in a variety of volunteer organisations,

57. Rorke, The Vocational Contributions.
58. Ibid., 8.
59. Thomis, A Place of Light and Learning, 397.
60. Rorke, The Vocational Contributions, 11.
61. Mackinnon, Love and Freedom, 141.
62. Rorke, The Vocational Contributions, 12.
63. Ibid.
many taking up prominent roles utilising the skills and networks they gained through their university education.

Members of the UQWGA felt that their networks and affiliations were an important way to express their opinions and contribute their skills and knowledge to a broader audience. To have received a university education was valued highly as a privilege that obligated women to make a concerted contribution to the betterment of society. The networks of the association functioned at the organisational level as well as at the level of the individual member. Many members, such as Freda Bage, were also members of other organisations, in addition to being highly mobile. They regularly travelled overseas to meet with fellow graduates to learn what they were debating and share their issues of concern.

The identities of the early graduate women of The University of Queensland were strongly influenced by their experience as university students. Women entered the university as a minority, and their experiences and opportunities often differed from those of their male counterparts. For most graduate women, their career options were extremely constricted and those that married felt they had little choice but to take the role of wife and mother. For both married and single women, however, voluntary work was viewed as an effective way to contribute to society, remain part of a community of graduate women, and utilise the skills developed through university study. University education instilled in women a sense of privilege that brought with it a desire to give back to the community. This sense of privilege, however, was not necessarily borne out of a belief in entitlement and benefit; rather, it was the privilege of freedom and opportunity. Furthermore, a university education equipped these young women with skills and knowledge that they believed could be used to contribute to the betterment of society, particularly for women and children. Organisations such as the UQWGA allowed members on an individual level to make a contribution to society and find companionship amongst women who were also challenging occupational and educational mores. As both students and graduates, these women saw themselves as fully incorporated into life at The University of Queensland, not as part of a separate minority.67

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67. I would like to thank Tanya Fitzgerald for assistance with this article.