

# Peer group activities supporting women's career development and well being at work

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The Laboratory of Electrical Engineering and Health is participating in the WomEqual project, which aims at developing operation models for women to support their career development and well being at work, in business, and research institutes, primarily in the field of technology. The aim of the subproject "Finding a working operational model for peer support groups for women in Universities of Technology" at Tampere University of Technology is to reduce the mental workload by founding peer support groups and developing different working operational models for these groups. The aim of this paper is to introduce actions planned and made to develop peer group activities to support women's career development and well being at work. The project is funded by Ministry of Education Finland, municipalities, Technology Industries of Finland and the European Social Fund.

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## 1. Introduction

The amount of women among professors, teachers and researches in Universities of Technology such as Tampere University of Technology (TUT) is still quite small. For example the number of female professors at TUT is 10, which is about 6 % of all the professors. Working in such male dominated field can increase the mental load on women, for example because of lack of network relations. In peer group sessions developed within this project, women can discuss and get support from other women that are in, or have been in a similar situation. The purpose of peer groups is to offer a network for women, who may be in the minority of the personnel in their work communities and thus don't necessarily have a female network at work. Figure 1 introduces some aspects which may have an influence on the need for peer support group activities.

## 2. Starting the WomEqual-project at Tampere University of Technology

The Laboratory of Electrical Engineering and Health, Tampere University of Technology (TUT) is participating in the WomEqual project coordinated by Helsinki University of Technology (TKK), which aims at developing operation models for women to support their career development and well being at work, in business, and research institutes, primarily in the field of technology. The aim of the project "Finding a working operational model for peer support groups for women in Universities of Technology" at TUT is to reduce the mental work load by founding peer support groups and developing different working operational models for these groups. Peer group support actions in Universities of Technology can be aimed for example at postgraduates, female teachers, women trying to combine family and work, etc.

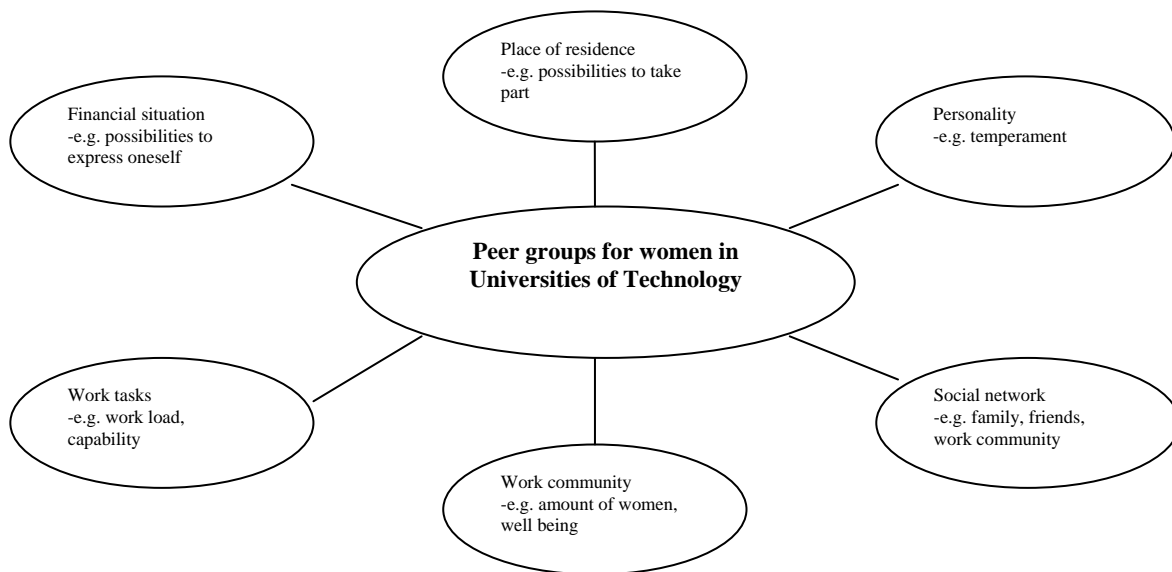


Fig. 1: Different aspects to be taken into account when considering the need for peer group activities

The aims of the project at TUT are the following: realising a need survey of the group working's operations models, assembling peer support groups and making an operation plan, running peer support groups and sharing experiences with other universities (national and international), intervening assessment of peer support operation, founding new peer support groups, stabilising operation, spreading good functions and mainstreaming. The project started at TUT in May 2005 and will last until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2007. The project is funded by the Ministry of Education Finland, municipalities (Helsinki, Tampere, Lappeenranta, Imatra, Oulu, Espoo), Technology Industries of Finland and the European Social Fund

### 3. Questionnaire to clarify the need for peer groups

The web-based questionnaire to clarify the need for peer group activities was sent by e-mail to female personnel of TUT (professors, assistants, researchers and lecturers) in June 2005. The inquiry was sent to 244 women, 19 of them were unavailable. 114 women did answer the questionnaire, so the answering percentage was 51 %.

In the questionnaire the recipients were asked to define their professional status (professor,

assistant, researcher or lecturer) and the age of the participant as background information. The main questions were in form of eight statements. In five statements participants should choose from alternatives "totally agree", "agree mostly", "maybe", "disagree mostly" or "totally disagree". These five statements were "I am interested in taking part in peer group activities", "Women in the technology field do need peer support groups", "Women in the technology field do need mentorship activities", "I would also like to get peer group members outside TUT" and "I would also like to get men in peer groups". In three statements there were different alternatives to choose from in each statement. In the sixth statement "The most interesting topic to discuss in peer groups" the alternatives were "management", "teaching", "family and work" and "doctoral thesis". In the seventh statement they were asked the appropriate size for peer groups. The alternatives were "from 5 to 10", "from 10 to 15", "from 15 to 20" and "over 20". When asked how often peer group meetings should be held the alternatives were "once a week", "every second week", "once a month", "every other month" and "every now and then". In the end of the questionnaire the participants were free to comment on questions verbally.

Figure 2 introduces some of the results. A clear

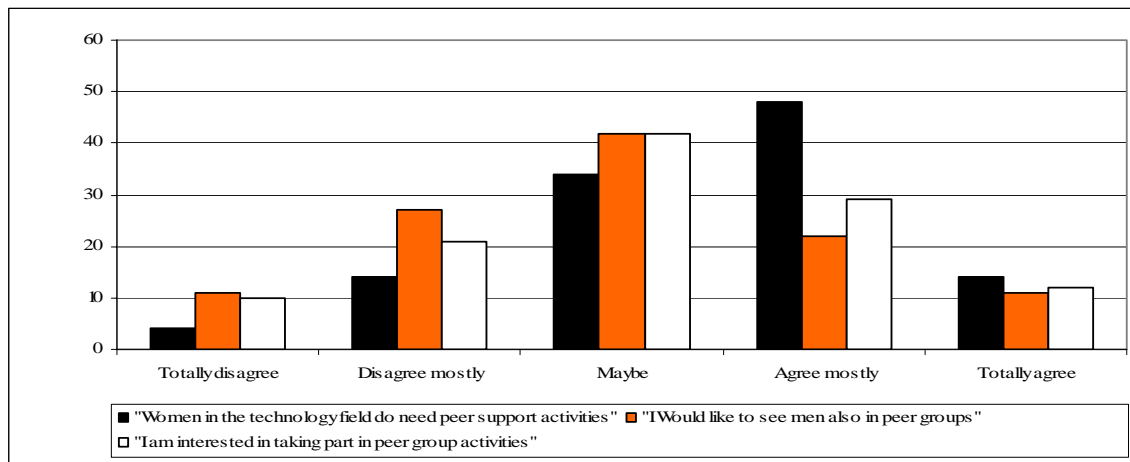


Fig. 2: Feedback from the TUT female personnel (n=114)

majority of those who responded were researchers and most of the participants were in the age group from 25 to 39. Most of the participants thought that peer groups should also include members from outside TUT also. Regarding the results the most popular alternative for peer group theme was “doctoral thesis”, after that “management”, then “family and work” and last “teaching”. According to the answers the appropriate group size would be from 5 to 10 persons and the meetings should take place once a month or less frequently.

Figure 2 shows that regarding the results women working in the University of Technology do need peer support group activities. Almost the same amount of participants thought that mentorship activities are also needed. When asked if women would also like to get men involved, the opinions were divided rather evenly for and against (see Fig. 2). Answers also indicated that a greater share of those women who answered the survey were interested in taking part in the peer groups themselves rather than not participating (see Fig 2). To summarise, the results indicate that this kind of activity is needed.

#### 4. Peer groups activities

The first bulletin about the establishment of peer groups at TUT was published in the Intranet of TUT on 24<sup>th</sup> August and then on 2<sup>nd</sup> September. In that bulletin peer group activities were generally introduced and there were also instructions on how to report to peer group. In addition there were also two newspaper articles about the project in September 2005, which may have encouraged some to take part in the peer groups. Participants were also invited from the

University of Tampere, Tampere Polytechnic, the University of Vaasa and Tampere Society of Technology.

Three peer groups were established during September and October 2006: one for female executives, one for post-graduates and one for teachers and researchers. Men also were welcomed to participate in peer groups, mainly because of the results of questionnaire (see fig 2). In all groups there are 30 participants altogether, 27 of which are women. The first peer group meeting took place in October 2005. At the first meeting group members introduced themselves and the reasons why they were taking part in the peer group. With each group there was a discussion about the thematic subjects the group would like to approach and discuss in the following meetings. It was agreed that the subject for every meeting would be decided as a group beforehand. The duration of the meetings has been one hour and a half per each meeting. After the short introduction to the theme there is time for open conversation. Some of the discussion topics at the meetings have included for example: working as a woman in a male dominated field, general well being at work and scheduling.

Every peer group has met once a month until January 2006. Feedback from the peer group members is collected after each meeting by e-mail (see Fig. 3). Meetings are planned to continue at least until May 2006, so there would be eight meetings for each groups. If the group members want, it is also possible to meet in autumn 2006.

New peer groups will be established in autumn 2006. Different kinds of groups will be compared and evaluated with the aim of developing operation models further.

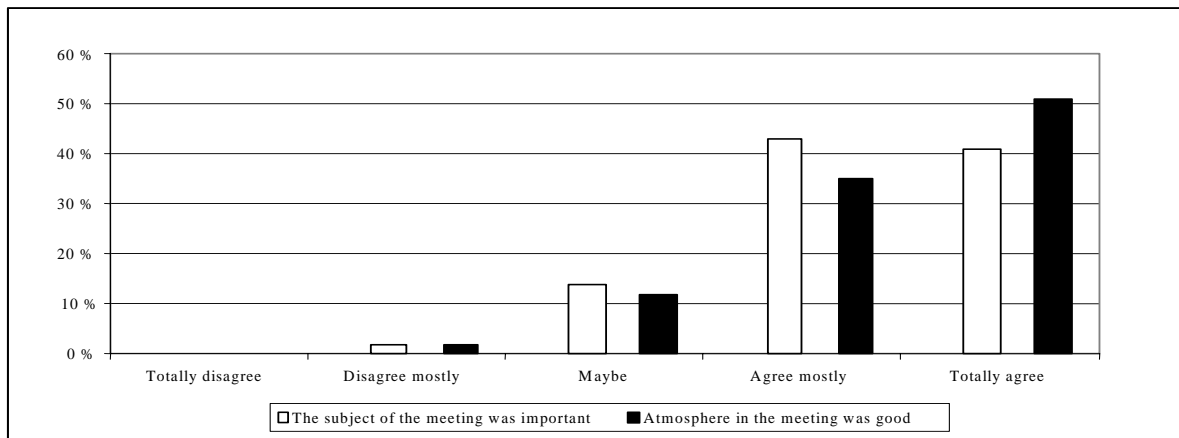


Fig. 3 Feedback for the statements “The subject of the meeting was important” and “Atmosphere in the meeting was good”

### 5. Feedback from the group members

Figure 3 introduces feedback collected from the group members. In the feedback form there are two statements “The subject of the meeting was important” and “Atmosphere in the meeting was good” which participants can value as 1 “totally disagree”, 2 “disagree mostly”, 3 “maybe”, 4 “agree mostly” or 5 “totally agree”. At the end of the form participants are free to comment on questions verbally, so the feedback form is, except for questions, shorter but similar to the questionnaire formulated to clarify the need for peer group activities in June 2005.

After four meetings, which means approximately half of all planned meetings, the feedback shows that the peer group activities have succeed rather well. On the other hand, it can be quite challenging to get a group meeting running smoothly and so that members feel well matched.

The reply percentage of the e-mail questionnaire has been 65 %. Participants have valued the statement “The subject of the meeting was important” in the following way (see figure 3): “totally disagree” 0 %, “disagree mostly” 2 %, “maybe” 14 %, “agree mostly” 43 % and “totally agree” 41 %. The statement “Atmosphere in the meeting was good” was valued as follows (see fig. 3): “totally disagree” 0 %, “disagree mostly” 2 %, “maybe” 12 %, “agree mostly” 35 % and “totally agree” 51 %. Feedback from the peer group members will be collected after each meeting and it will be evaluated further.

### 6. Conclusion

Regarding the results from the inquiry made in June 2005 and the experiences during four first peer group meetings it seems that peer group activities are a good way to develop well being at work and improve the networking of women in their professional life. On the other hand, it is quite challenging to form groups and to get meetings working well.