**International Women’s Day is a time to reflect on the position of women in society, politics and business, says Massey University management professor Sarah Leberman. The lack of women in leadership positions is a vexing and persistent problem that Professor Leberman has spent her career researching and trying to solve. Her latest initiative, the Young Women’s Leadership Programme, aims to reach young women before they leave school.**

This year’s programme kicks off next week and will bring around 200 Year 12 students together on the university’s three campuses to learn about leadership and build their confidence and networks. The students will then be divided into groups to work on delivering a project that makes a difference to their local community.

Those chosen to participate in the programme are not always seen as leaders – but all young women have the potential to be, Professor Leberman says.

“Traditionally the people who are identified as leaders in school environments are those who are confident and get noticed – the prefects, head girls and sports team captains,” she says. “I think we lose a lot of potential leaders because we don’t nurture the more naturally quiet students or those who don’t quite fit in that box. This programme is aimed at young women who are not in leadership positions, but seek to exercise leadership.”

The first part of the programme focuses on leadership concepts, values, identifying passions, communication and self awareness, and the second phase is about putting those skills into practice. The students return to Massey in May to report on their projects which, in the past, have ranged from drug and alcohol education schemes, to charity fundraisers and encouraging more students to take an interest in science or sport.

Each group is assigned a female staff member from Massey as a mentor to monitor progress and provide advice.

While Professor Leberman acknowledges young men who do not “fit the box” may need leadership programmes too, she says the dynamics of an all-female programme is very different.

“I’ve run mixed programmes before and you don’t get the same level of openness, particularly at this age. There is fundamentally a confidence gap between men and women, the research shows that, so I think there is greater need for a young women’s programme.

“When women go out into the workplace they get paid less and there are challenges that men do not seem to face. While there is still a pay gap one year out from graduation, I think we have an issue.”

She says that while there are many organisational and societal reasons behind the relatively low number of women in leadership roles, the “confidence gap” is something that can be addressed at an individual level.

There are plenty of young women who agree because the Young Women’s Leadership Programme is always oversubscribed.

“Some schools do have active leadership programmes, but many don’t. For those young women who haven’t been identified as leaders, there’s often little access to resources to build confidence and skills, so we are helping to fill that gap.”