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Gender equality in academia: a critical reflection

Hilary P.M. Winchester * and Lynette Browning 

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Gender equality in academia has been monitored in Australia for the past three decades so it is timely to reflect on what progress has been made, what works, and what challenges remain. When data were first published on the gender composition of staff in Australian universities in the mid-1980s women comprised 20 per cent of academic staff and held 6 per cent of senior positions. Since the early 1990s many Australian universities have had policies in place to remove sex discrimination and initiatives to increase women's representation in academia. Two decades on, women comprise 44 per cent of academic staff and hold 31 per cent of senior positions. How did this happen? What worked? Are there still challenges to be addressed? This paper provides a critical reflection on what has worked, the practical impacts on gender in academia in Australia and what challenges remain for the future.

Keywords: academia; Australia; equality; gender; universities; women

Introduction

When data were published on the gender composition of staff in Australian universities in the mid-1980s women comprised 20 per cent of academic staff but held only 6 per cent of the senior positions (above senior lecturer). The increase in the representation of women in academic roles in Australian universities changed dramatically over the next 25 years, and by 2014 women comprised 44 per cent of academic staff and held 31 per cent of senior positions. How did this happen? Changes to gender equality in academia in Australia reflect wider societal changes, but are also directly affected by a range of influences including government legislation, regulatory frameworks, cross institutional action plans, university strategies, and committed individuals. The impact of these influences on gender equality in academia has included increased awareness across the sector, implementation of gender equity strategies at the institutional level, and slow but steady progress.

Australian Government legislation 1984 to 2012

In 2014 Australia celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Commonwealth)*. In 1986 the Australian Government passed the *Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act* which had two goals: to remove sex discrimination in the workplace; and to promote equal employment opportunity for women. This Act was subsequently replaced by the *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 (Commonwealth)* which had three main objectives: employment

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for women on the basis of merit; the elimination of discrimination against women in employment; and to foster consultation between employers and employees on issues concerning equal opportunity for women. The 1999 Act established the national Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA). This statutory authority administered the Act and required all organisations with more than a hundred employees to report annually against a set of prescribed criteria regarding their gender composition and their initiatives for women in the workplace. Organisations could apply for the award of *Employer of Choice for Women*, and in 2001 fifty-five received this award. By 2012, 125 organisations, including 19 of Australia's 39 universities, had received this award on the basis of gender pay equity, the percentage of women in executive management, and initiatives such as maternity leave provisions and flexible work practices. This award was replaced in 2014 with the *Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) Employer of Choice for Gender Equality*.

The current Australian Government legislation to address gender discrimination in employment is the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012* (Australian Government, 2012b) which established the new Workplace Gender Equality Agency, responsible for administering the Act and charged with promoting and improving gender equality in Australian workplaces. More comprehensive than previous legislation, this Act has five principal objectives: promote and improve gender equality; support employers to remove barriers to the full and equal participation of women in the workforce; promote the elimination of discrimination on the basis of gender in relation to employment matters; foster workplace consultation; and improve the productivity and competitiveness of Australian business through the advancement of gender equality in employment and in the workplace.

Universities in Australia operate not only within the context of this legislation, but also within a system of regulatory frameworks specific to higher education.

Australian Government regulatory frameworks

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was established in 2000 to undertake five-yearly audits of the academic activities and quality assurance arrangements in Australian universities. AUQA was replaced in 2011 by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). TEQSA regulates and assures the quality of Australia's large, diverse, and complex higher education sector. The sector has an annual revenue of around \$20 billion and employs more than 100,000 people (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, 2014). TEQSA registers and assesses the performance of higher education providers operating in Australia against the *Higher Education Standards Framework*. Both agencies, AUQA and TEQSA, have criticised the gender composition of universities' academic staff and their committees. They recognise the value of the diversity of boards, also promoted by the Australian Institute of Company Directors and state governments and have not held back from criticism of the gender composition of university councils and boards of directors. Following extensive consultation the *Higher Education Standards Framework* was revised in 2014. While it includes reference to student diversity stating that institutional policies, practices, and approaches to teaching and learning must be designed to accommodate student diversity, and specifying that staff must be equipped for their roles, it does not include a reference to staff diversity or the gender composition of the academic staff or committees but relies on more general frameworks of good governance such as those of the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) and the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) (Australian Government, 2014, p. 10).

National frameworks to support successful women's leadership in higher education in Australia

Universities Australia, formerly the Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee, was founded in 1920 to advance higher education in Australia through voluntary, cooperative, and coordinated action. It is a peak industry body, its membership is comprised of the vice chancellors of Australia's 39 universities and their representatives serve on many national and international bodies of importance to higher education. Australia's first female Vice Chancellor, Professor Dianne Yerbury AO, was appointed to Macquarie University in 1986 and four years later Professor Fay Gale AO was appointed as Vice Chancellor at the University of Western Australia. Australia's third female vice chancellor, Professor Denise Bradley AC, was appointed to the University of South Australia in 1997.

In 1994 senior women in Australian universities formed the Australian Colloquium of Senior Women Executives in Higher Education (the Colloquium), now known as Universities Australia Executive Women (UAEW). Led by Professor Eleanor Ramsay, Professor Anne Edwards, and Professor Margaret Gardner, UAEW developed the *Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee's Action Plan for Women Employed in Australian Universities, 1999 to 2003* (Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee, 1999) which was endorsed by the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee. This plan had three main objectives: to exert the AVCC's leadership to promote the achievement of gender equity in Australia; to develop strategies based on research for overcoming barriers to gender equity for university staff; and to refine the AVCC and university staff development services to target gender equity more effectively.

This first action plan had an impact on gender equity in Australian universities in a number of ways, the first of which was to raise awareness at the most senior levels and within human resources and staff development units. The plan encouraged the sharing of strategies to address gender equity which were based on research. Data collection and analysis, which clearly showed the size of the gender gap, was undertaken and disseminated by the Queensland University of Technology. Sharing of the data, strategies, and best practice was via the Colloquium and, at the practitioner level, through the Equal Opportunity Practitioners in Higher Education Association (EOPHEA). Some Australian universities had development programmes in place for women from 1992, and in 1996 the Australian Technology Network (ATN) implemented an innovative programme, the Women's Executive Development Program (WEXDEV) for senior women across the five universities in its group (Curtin University, Queensland University of Technology, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, the University of South Australia, and the University of Technology Sydney). This was the first and only cross-institutional programme of its type which continued until 2013. University staff development courses at that time were run by the AVCC and included some programmes for specific cohorts of women, at a relatively high cost.

The *Second AVCC Action Plan for Women Employed in Australian Universities 2006–2010* (Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee, 2006) was led by Professor Hilary Winchester and Professors Julie Jackson, Belinda Probert, and Sharon Bell, and had five priority goals: to continue to encourage all universities to integrate equity strategies and performance indicators into their institutional plans; to improve significantly the representation of women in senior roles; to monitor the patterns of entry of women into academia; to improve the monitoring of gender equity in workforce data; and to identify and engage universities with critical matters through research on gender equity issues and dissemination of good practice.

This second plan shifted the base of the argument from equity to productivity with a theme of ‘what gets measured gets attention’. This was consistent with the EOWA theme at that time of ‘what gets measured gets done’. Sector wide data were used to set targets and enable institutions to focus on critical areas. Many universities focussed their efforts on female staff at the senior levels – at associate professor and professor (Levels D and E) for academic women, and at level eight and above for professional women. Sharing of the data, strategies, and best practice continued at the senior level via UAEW, and at the practitioner level through EOPHEA. The ATN WEXDEV programme continued to be at the forefront of initiatives for senior women in universities, while their participant universities engaged in strong specific programmes for cohorts (such as senior lecturer to associate professor), and other universities such as the University of Western Australia also became active in the sector. The setting of targets in the Second Plan, while not identified as one of the five priority goals, appeared to have a real impact on the actions of individual universities.

The most recent plan, the *Universities Australia Strategy for Women: 2011–2014* (Universities Australia, 2010), built on the previous two and is based on productive diversity by encouraging universities to incorporate equity strategies and targets in strategic plans and greater leadership by Australia’s Vice Chancellors, both collectively and as individuals. This strategy has seven goals:

- Encourage universities to incorporate equity strategies and targets in their strategic planning, with unambiguous leadership by the vice-chancellors.
- Increase the recognition of the contributions of women to the productivity and advancement of Australia’s universities (FASTS recommends *a stronger business case linking diversity and innovation*).
- Improve representation of women in higher education at all levels to more strongly reflect representation in society, including indigenous women.
- Increase the proportion of women in senior leadership positions particularly at the vice-chancellor level, and including deans, directors and senior managers and in a wider range of portfolios and discipline groupings.
- Identify women in middle management and mentor them as the future senior leaders in higher education (*Nature*, June 2010, p. 1107; (Russo, 2010)).
- Test the effectiveness of interventions at critical points in women’s careers.
- Showcase senior executive women via media profiling at strategic points throughout the course of the plan.

Over its four-year life this strategy called for a continued focus on critical points, more overt and available mentoring and leadership training, and media profiling of women. The strategy also included specific measures for gender ratios for all academic levels by discipline and senior administrative roles by portfolio, promotions at all levels, gender ratios in enrolment and completion of PhDs by discipline, and participation in career development programmes.

The inclusion of gender ratios provided specific measures and targets for the sector, and a focus on critical career points where women’s participation is markedly reduced. The third plan also provided a shift again to collegiate cross-sectoral professional development for women, but at a much lower cost which has provided greater accessibility for women in their career trajectories.

Cross university and institutional frameworks

Universities within Australia have had in place strategies and initiatives to increase the representation of women in senior positions, some from as early as 1992, and some more comprehensive than others. Many of these initiatives and programmes have been highly successful and some have been evaluated and documented. Some good examples include:

- ATN WEXDEV Leadership Program (Browning, 2009)
- WomenResearch 21 at the University of New South Wales (Devos, 2004)
- Leadership Development for Women Programme at the University of Western Australia (de Vries, 2005)
- Flinders University Mentoring Scheme (Gardiner, 2005)
- Women in Leadership Program at Griffith University (Browning, 2008)
- Women and Leadership Program at the University of South Australia (Browning, 2008)

EOWA 2012 Australian Census of Women in Leadership

In the decade from 2002 to 2012, the EOWA undertook a regular census of women in leadership in Australia. This was the pre-eminent body of research tracking the representation of women in board and senior executive positions in ASX-listed companies. The last census extended the analysis from ASX 200 companies to ASX 500 companies providing a more complete picture of women in leadership.

For the first time, in 2012, the Census showed a significant increase in the number of women on boards with 61.5 per cent of ASX 200 companies having at least one female director. But despite acceleration in the progress for women on the boards of ASX 200 companies, there had been negligible progress for females in executive ranks over the past decade. Women comprised less than 10 per cent of executives of ASX 200 (9.7 per cent) and ASX 500 (9.2 per cent) companies. Only 12 ASX 500 companies had a female CEO. In contrast, women held 12.3 per cent of directorships in the ASX 200 but only 9.2 per cent in the ASX 500, indicating that larger companies are more likely to have female directors on their boards. Following this census, the ASX Corporate Governance Council Principles and Recommendations relating to gender diversity were introduced (Australian Government, 2012a).

Research

In the 1950s women represented 20 per cent of Australia's university students and by the 2000s they represented more than 50 per cent. In the 1980s, when monitoring of the gender composition of staff in universities commenced, women represented 20 per cent of academic staff and by the 2000s they represented almost double that, around 40 per cent. At that time it was considered that gender equity in Australian universities no longer needed attention (Carrington & Pratt, 2003, p. 5). But despite the progress made, significant gender differences remained at both the senior levels and across the disciplines. Men still accounted for more than 80 per cent of senior academic staff in Australian universities and were over-represented in fields such as science, technology, and engineering. Female students remained concentrated in the cheapest university courses with weaker employment opportunities, less security, and lower income expectations in fields such as social sciences, humanities, arts, education, and health, especially nursing.

The Australian Government's 1990 paper, *A fair chance for all* (Australian Government, 1990), defined the objective for equity as needing to ensure all Australians had the opportunity to participate successfully in education, and it set specific targets for increasing the representation of women with particular emphasis on engineering and other non-traditional areas, as well as in postgraduate study. More than a decade later those targets had not been met and in 2002 the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee policy statement emphasised gender equity as a policy issue for the tertiary sector.

A comprehensive examination undertaken in 2003 found that the majority of academic staff were still men and that women were still concentrated at the lower end of the hierarchy (Carrington & Pratt, 2003), although the number of female vice chancellors had increased in that decade from two to nine. A decade later, despite fluctuations, that has not changed significantly; in late 2014 there were 10 women among the 39 vice-chancellors. The study also found that the vertical and horizontal differences remained and the contributing factors were considered to include:

- the poor representation of women on key decision-making bodies
- the notions of merit being based on what men in universities do well
- women's career interruptions
- women not applying for promotion at the same rate as men
- women being less likely to have a PhD
- research priorities tending to favour those disciplines where men are more likely to dominate

(Carrington & Pratt, 2003, p. 8).

Many of the strategies put in place in Australian universities and which have contributed to increasing the representation of women in senior positions over the past three decades have been based on research, some of which has been undertaken by committed individuals, and some funded by Universities Australia and sponsored by the senior women of UAW. Studies by Belinda Probert and funded by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) investigated the persistence of unequal outcomes for women and men in relation to pay and status in academia. They found that many analysts of gender inequity in universities had been 'looking in the wrong place' (Probert, 2005, p. 70) and that the focus needed to be on the impact of the household on the working lives of women and men. In particular, paid maternity leave, access to part time employment, and transparency around workload allocations and promotions criteria had a significant impact on reducing gender discrimination. Neale and White (2014) provide case histories of women who have negotiated career progression through unconventional career paths despite the gendered institutional practices and culture.

Research sponsored by Universities Australia, through UAW, investigated promotions policies and practices in 34 of Australia's 39 Universities to evaluate progress towards gender equity and the success rates of female applicants for promotion. The study was based on the commonly accepted assertions that women are less likely to apply for promotion, are more reticent in putting themselves forward, are less successful in applying for promotion than men, are more likely to experience career interruptions than men, and are over-represented in the disciplines that do not attract large research grants (Winchester, Lorenzo, Browning, & Chesterman, 2006, p. 506). The hypothesis was that academic promotion policies that do not take career interruptions into account and which focus primarily on research as criteria would disadvantage women and constitute barriers to promotion. However, the study found that there was generally good practice across the

sector in relation to promotion policies and practices, and that there were good success rates for women who do apply. The findings supported those of Probert's study that the underrepresentation of women in senior positions in Australian universities 'is not a result of poor policy or erratic implementation, but is a deep-seated cultural issue' (Winchester et al., 2006, p. 519). In fact, women were more successful than men in promotions processes, a benefit of transparent policy, but out-of-round processes which favoured men were secretive and potentially problematic. The analysis of the data found that over time the promotion barrier had shifted from Level C to Level D (senior lecturer to associate professor), but it would take 49 years to achieve parity in the professoriate at the rate of progress at that time (Winchester, Chesterman, Lorenzo, & Browning, 2005, p. 31).

Historically, research success has been one of the main criteria for academic promotion in Australian universities. While the study by Winchester et al. investigated promotions policies and practices, another study was undertaken around the same time to identify the dimensions of women in research in relation to their participation, status, and leadership:

The available data negates the inevitability of a simple 'supply' or 'pipeline' paradigm, suggesting that high levels of participation and success of women at undergraduate and post-graduate levels are not translating at the expected rate into similar patterns of participation and success in research.

(Bell & Bentley, 2005)

This study examined the gender profiles of students from undergraduate to doctoral completions, academic staff from postdoctoral and research appointments, membership of the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) assessment panels, and grant success and track record for their respective competitive grants. In 2003, women accounted for around 60 per cent of all undergraduate completions, almost 50 per cent of all doctoral completions, and almost 40 per cent of academic staff, but remained concentrated at the lower end of the academic hierarchy. Success rates for ARC and NHMRC competitive grants for women and men were comparable but participation rates were significantly lower for women. Women were also found to be underrepresented among the deputy vice chancellors (research) and on the ARC and NHMRC assessment panels. The study concluded that there is a 'tipping point' following the completion of a PhD, 'where women are pressed by the combination of an increasingly competitive system' and in many cases are taking the option of junior or research assistant positions which defers or denies them a clear research career trajectory (Bell & Bentley, 2005, p. 10).

Following this, a study was commissioned by Universities Australia to investigate gender differences in early post PhD employment in Australian universities. The data at the time showed that although women accounted for almost half of all doctoral completions in Australia, their achievements did not translate into the anticipated changes in gendered patterns of academic staffing (Dever et al., 2008). A PhD had become a prerequisite for academic employment and an important stage in the development and consolidation of a research profile and, as stated, one of the main criteria for academic promotion, especially to senior levels. The study found that a significantly higher proportion of female graduates were in less secure employment situations and were more likely to work part time. Significantly, fewer female graduates were in supervisory or managerial positions compared to male graduates. Female graduates worked to a greater extent in

academic teaching and in advising or mentoring students, while male graduates worked to a greater extent in undertaking research, managing, and supervising others. Gender was significantly associated with differences in annual earnings with female graduates generally on lower terms regarding earnings, employment conditions, and level of appointment. The general conclusion supported by the study was that,

there are indeed significant differences between male and female PhD candidates in attitudes, family circumstances, the social context of PhD research, employment outcomes, and career development. In all of these matters women are less likely than men to report positive outcomes.

(Dever et al., 2008, p. iii)

A later research project supported by the ARC analysed the gender segregation in university staffing with a focus on vertical segregation and found that it had been reduced but was far from being eliminated. Comparisons between the relative share of women and men across academic levels showed women's over representation at the undergraduate levels, narrowing of the gap at postgraduate levels, and reversing to a male dominated gender gap at doctoral level which subsequently widens in increasing levels through an academic career. The data indicated that women are not only underrepresented in the professoriate, they are also underrepresented in movements into the professoriate. At around 30 per cent, women's share of entries is well below their share of the feeder group which is around 40 per cent (Strachan, Broadbent, Whitehouse, Peetz, & Bailey, 2011, p. 318).

Impact of 15 years of gender equity 1999 to 2014

Although slow, progress has been made towards gender equity in university staffing in Australia over the past 15 years. Since 1999 the emphasis has shifted from gender equity to productive diversity, as the table below outlines (Table 1).

In Australia, there has been an increase in the representation of women across all levels of academia. In 2014, women comprised 44 per cent of the total number of academic staff in Australian universities and 31 per cent above senior lecturer (associate professor and above). Where women's representation increased most rapidly at senior lecturer level between 1996 and 2004 (Winchester et al., 2006), recent data show that since 2005 representation of women in Australian universities has continued to increase at levels D and E (associate professor and professor) at a similar rate to Level C (senior lecturer) (Browning, Thompson, & Dawson, 2013, p. 12). The graph below illustrates the

Table 1. Impact of 15 years of gender equity in Australia.

	1999–2003	2006–2010	2011–2014
Discourse	Gender equity	Workforce productivity	Productive diversity
Focus	Indicators	Targets and Monitoring	VC leadership Media profiling
Activities	Research AVCC Staff Development Awareness raising	Research Mentoring (2008-) Sector planning	Research Workshops Diversity of individuals and universities

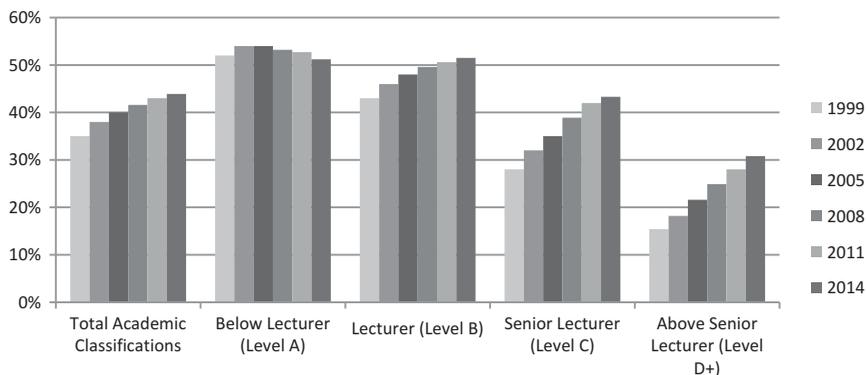


Figure 1. Percentage female full-time and fractional full-time academic staff in Australian universities 1999–2014.

Source: Australian Government Department of Education and Training *Selected Higher Education Statistics – Staff 2014 (FTE)*.

increase in the representation of female academic staff in Australian universities, by level, from 1999 to 2014 (Figure 1).

The underrepresentation of women in research is a key issue which is being actively tackled in Europe by significant investment from the European Union (EU). For example, the EU's seventh framework programme for research (FP7) has invested €2.2 m in the Institutional Transformation for Effecting Gender Equality in Research (INTEGER) Project. The project is aimed at creating sustainable structural change to improve the participation and career paths of female researchers in European higher education and research institutions through the implementation of bespoke transformational gender action plans (T-GAPs). In contrast, Australia's 39 universities contribute just \$1000 each per year to UAEW to support the activities of *Universities Australia Strategy for Women: 2011–2014* (Universities Australia, 2010).

The concept of the 'leaky pipeline' is well documented, as are the terms 'glass ceiling' and 'sticky floor', all used to describe the decreasing proportion of women moving up the educational and professional hierarchy. The 'pipeline' loses more women than men (European Commission, 2012). Women's underrepresentation in research is exacerbated by their vertical segregation into humanities and social science disciplines which have less need of technical equipment and large research teams, and therefore attract lower levels of research funding than scientific and medical research. While there has been a significant increase in the number of women with doctorates, the essential qualification for a research career, there is nonetheless almost no change in the proportion of women employed as research-only academics (Browning et al., 2013). There is also evidence that women remain underrepresented in research leadership positions and as chief investigators on funded research projects (Bell, 2009). One positive change is that, since about 2007, there has been a rapid increase in the number of women leading the research portfolio in universities who will contribute to cultural change and expectations within their institutions (Figure 2).

As the data show, considerable progress has been made towards gender equality in Australian universities but there are still challenges to be addressed. Reflection on the past decades has provided some insight into what has worked and what challenges still need attention.

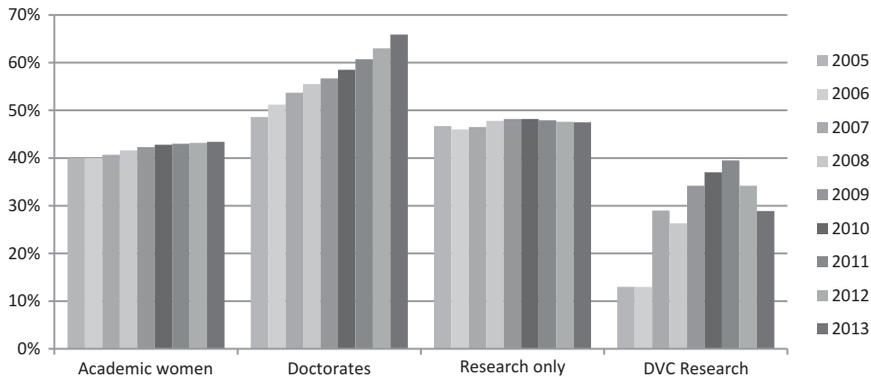


Figure 2. Comparison of percentage of selected female full-time and fractional full-time academic research positions held by women in Australian universities 2005–2013.

Source: Australian Government Department of Education *Selected Higher Education Statistics – Staff 2013 (FTE)*.

What works

The Australian Government has provided the legislative basis for working towards gender equity in the workplace. As a country, Australia has been relatively progressive in addressing women's inequality and the table below lists some of the key milestones (Table 2).

The important elements of national frameworks for universities have been:

- demonstrated leadership from the most senior levels, the vice chancellors of Australia's 39 universities
- commitment and action by the members of UAEW
- the setting and monitoring of targets
- analysis and dissemination of data to enable the identification of critical points for intervention strategies
- initiatives and actions based on research.

In individual universities successful strategies have included the setting of institutional key performance indicators in corporate plans, transparent processes for recruitment and promotion, and having in place good career development programmes and support networks for women. Less tangibly, the passion and commitment of the early female vice chancellors, convenors of executive women and other senior women in academe have continued to bring attention to the issue, to focus on the social inequity and the waste of productivity to bring about significant change in the gender profile of Australia's universities.

Challenges

There are still a number of challenges to address to achieve real gender equity in Australia's universities. Women are still overrepresented in some disciplinary, teaching, and student support areas and significantly underrepresented in research. Many women lack experience in managing budgets, a vital component of leadership roles. The 'glass

Table 2. Key milestones in addressing women's inequality in Australia.

1881	The University of Adelaide was the first Australian university, and only the second in the world, to admit women to academic courses
1895	Australian women who were British subjects, 21 years and older, gained the right to vote and stand in parliament in South Australia
1902	The Commonwealth Parliament passed the Commonwealth Franchise Act, which enabled all women who were British subjects, 21 years and older, to vote and stand for election for the Federal Parliament
1948	Australia's first woman awarded a PhD by the University of Melbourne
1962	The right to vote in federal elections was granted to Australian Aboriginal women who, together with Australian Aboriginal men, had been specifically excluded from the franchise in Australia by the Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902
1984	The Australian Government passed the <i>Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Commonwealth)</i>
1985	Data collection on the gender of staff in Australia's universities commenced
1986	The Australian Government passed the <i>Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act</i>
1986	Australia's first female Vice Chancellor, Professor Emerita Dianne Yerbury AO, was appointed to Macquarie University
1994	Senior women in Australian universities formed the Australian Colloquium of Senior Women Executives in Higher Education, now known as Universities Australia Executive Women (UAEW)
1999	The Australian Government passed the <i>Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 (Commonwealth)</i>
1999	Australia's vice chancellors endorsed the <i>Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee's Action Plan for Women Employed in Australian Universities, 1999 to 2003</i>
2006	Australia's vice chancellors endorse <i>The Second AVCC Action Plan for Women Employed in Australian Universities 2006–2010</i>
2010	Australia's vice chancellors endorse the <i>Universities Australia Strategy for Women: 2011–2014</i>
2010	Julia Gillard became Australia's first female Prime Minister
2012	The Australian Government passed the <i>Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012</i>

ceiling' or the 'glass cliff' still persist and so do the 'not doable jobs' at the senior levels (Chesterman, Ross-Smith, & Peters, 2005). More effort needs to be made to improve the representation of women in higher education to reflect the diversity of Australian society, in particular indigenous women, women from non-English speaking backgrounds, and women with disabilities. The focus on productive diversity is a welcome reflection of the opening of universities to wider participation from the Australian community as a whole.

Conclusion

In the mid-1980s women comprised 20 per cent of academic staff and held 6 per cent of the positions above senior lecturer. Three decades later, the proportion of female academic staff has more than doubled, to 44 per cent, and the proportion of women in positions above senior lecturer has increased five-fold, to 31 per cent. How did this happen?

The Australian Government's *Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act* was designed to remove sex discrimination in the workplace and to promote equal opportunity for women. Ten years after the introduction of the Act, senior women in Australian universities formed the Australian Colloquium of Senior Women Executives in Higher Education (the Colloquium), now known as UAEW and subsequently developed three action plans which were endorsed by the vice chancellors of Australia's 39 universities. These action plans impacted on gender equity in Australian universities in many

ways: by raising awareness; encouraging the sharing of successful strategies; monitoring gender equity in workforce data with specific measures and targets; and shifting the argument from gender equity to productive diversity.

Many of the strategies put into place in Australian universities, and which have contributed to increasing the representation of women in senior positions, were based on research and recent research found that gender segregation in Australian universities has been reduced but is far from eliminated. Women are now overrepresented at the undergraduate levels, narrowing the gap at postgraduate levels. They are overrepresented in entry level positions in academia, reversing to a male dominated gender gap at senior lecturer level which subsequently widens in increasing levels through an academic career. Women are not only underrepresented in the professoriate, they are also underrepresented in movements into the professoriate.

Changes in gender equality for academic women staff in Australia reflect wider societal changes, but have been directly influenced by government legislation, regulatory frameworks, university strategies, cross institutional action plans, and committed individuals. The overall impact of these influences includes increased awareness across the sector and the implementation of gender equity strategies at the institutional level, and has ensured slow but steady progress, but there are still a number of challenges to address to achieve real gender equality in Australia's universities. Women are still overrepresented in some disciplinary, teaching, and student support areas, and significantly underrepresented in research. The 'leaky pipeline' still loses more women than men, the 'undoable jobs' persist at the senior levels, and more effort needs to be made to improve the representation of women in higher education to reflect the diversity of Australian society.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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