



S A G E
SCIENCE IN AUSTRALIA
GENDER EQUITY



**Athena
SWAN**

Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

Submission: Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE)

1 September 2023

Executive summary

SAGE welcomes the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report's strong focus on equity. We are uniquely positioned to advise on equity in higher education and the research sector.

As the leading provider of tailored workplace equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) programs for the sector, SAGE has deep experience working with universities through the Athena Swan Framework to build more safe and equitable workplaces where people of all backgrounds and identities can flourish.

Our expertise in this area shapes our below comments and feedback on the Accord Interim Report. As the Accord proceeds, we welcome any opportunities to work with the government on key issues and challenges.

We are largely supportive of the proposals within the report, particularly in relation to increased focus in student equity. However, **staff equity, diversity and inclusion amongst staff is central to realise student equity**. Making diverse life experiences in research journeys and teaching careers (such as STEMM) visible to students is an essential tool for ensuring that students from all backgrounds, experiences and identities can see something of themselves somewhere in the university.

To realise staff equity, diversity and inclusion, we recommend the Accord:

1. Develop a sector-wide strategy to embed equity, diversity and inclusion.
2. Link research and grant funding to a commitment to gender equity, diversity and inclusion.
3. Set targets to reach population parity for gender, First Nations, ethnic and disability representation in the university staff body.

In addition, we encourage the Accord to consider the potential consequences of a student participation increase on the workload and wellbeing of university academic and professional staff. This is because research from Australia shows that widening pool of students is likely to

increase demand for student services, including from research and teaching staff.¹ Research also suggests that pastoral or student care often falls to women². The Accord should consider **how pastoral care can be appropriately valued and ensure that it is a concern for all university staff**. Thus, we recommend:

4. Allocate dedicated funding for universities to implement systemic and structural workplace equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives.

¹ Bradley D, Noonan P, Nugent H and Scales B (2008) *Review of Australian higher education*, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Australian Government.

² Suzanne Macqueen, Erica Southgate & Jill Scevak (2023) [Supporting students from equity groups: experiences of staff and considerations for institutions](#), *Studies in Higher Education*, 48:2, 356-367

Develop a sector-wide strategy to embed equity, diversity and inclusion

The Accord should consider developing a sector-wide commitment and strategic plan towards gender equity, diversity and inclusion.

Advancements in student and staff equity will require a sector-wide, collaborative approach to address various interconnected and intersectional challenges. The Accord is an opportunity to transcend institutional silos and drive societal-level change through a national sector-wide strategy for Gender Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (GEDI).

A sector-wide strategic plan provides a framework to ensure the University system is moving towards a shared vision for GEDI. The strategy should promote cross-sector practices that make the higher education sector a safe and respectful place to work and learn. It should outline opportunities for all stakeholders who can create change, such as government, academia, industry, education and the broader communities. It is a powerful tool to ensure commitment and accountability for sustained change also at an organisational level.

Individual organisations should then be encouraged to develop tailored strategies for equity, diversity and inclusion, linking to the sector-wide goals. Organisations would thus be encouraged to focus on designing more inclusive policies and facilities where everyone can thrive, for example by enhancing workplace accessibility, flexible work options and gender-inclusive parental leave benefits.

The Tertiary Education Commission should oversee safety and workplace equity outcomes.

We are supportive of a Commission that has a First Nations Higher Education Council and an Equity Commissioner. It should be considered how the Equity Commissioner's remit could also cover EDI outcomes for staff.

Link research and grant funding to a commitment to gender equity, diversity and inclusion.

To support staff and student equity, Government can require a commitment to gender equity, diversity and inclusion as part of the assessment criteria for research funding. This also opens the opportunity to take an intersectional approach to gender equity, diversity and inclusion; that is, it should also address other intersections of marginalisation, such as cultural and linguistic diversity, disability, sexuality and First Nations identity.

Over the last years policies have been developed in Australia and internationally to link funding to gender equity and inclusion policies, including in the European Union³, Ireland⁴, and domestically at the Snow Medical Research Foundation⁵ and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)⁶. These initiatives are relatively new and thus the impact and outcomes are not yet clear. However, Australia could trial linking research funding to a commitment to GEDI policies, practices and outcomes.

For example, criteria for commitment might be evidenced by:

- The institution's GEDI strategy and performance
- Demographic diversity of the research team
- Demonstrating a GEDI lens to project design, implementation and expected benefits.
- Projects that can demonstrate the inclusion of, and value to, underrepresented and marginalised groups should be ranked more highly for competitive funding.

Set staff equity participation and attainment targets and track progress

We support the proposed targets for *student* participation and attainment. The Accord should consider introducing setting targets for the participation of marginalised groups among university staff.

Support a more diverse higher education workforce: it will be good for students and for communities.

A more diverse higher education workforce is essential to support the diverse student body that the Accord hopes to build. Staff members who share lived experience of marginalisation can offer a deeper understanding of the challenges facing equity students. They also serve as positive role models for those students. Seeing people like them at university, especially in prominent teaching and research positions, reinforces to these students that they belong there.⁷

³ Horizon Europe is the EU's 2021–2027 framework programme for research and innovation. To be eligible for Horizon Europe funding, applicants must show that their institution has a Gender Equality Plan that is publicly available, adequately resourced, evidence-based and supported by capacity building; and they have integrated a gender dimension in their research proposal, for example by examining any sex or gender differences in the outcomes of a drug trial.

⁴ Science Foundation Ireland (n.d.) [Irish funding bodies to require Athena SWAN gender equality accreditation for higher education institutions to be eligible for research funding](#), SFI website, accessed 31 March 2023.

⁵ Hare J (6 March 2023) ['No gender equality? Then no money from this major philanthropist'](#), Australian Financial Review, accessed 31 March 2023.

⁶ National Health and Medical Research Council (12 October 2022) [Working towards gender equity in Investigator Grants](#), NHMRC website, accessed 11 April 2023.

⁷ Parasnis I and Fischer SD (2005) ['Perceptions of diverse educators regarding ethnic-minority deaf college students, role models, and diversity'](#), *American Annals of the Deaf*, 150(4):343–349.

Jiang Z, Wang Y, Riggs DW, Mate S and Chapman A (2022) [Supporting careers of LGBTQIA+ students in Australian universities](#), National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

To achieve the Accord's vision of community engagement, universities should have strong connections to *all* the communities they hope to serve. As trusted members of their communities, equity staff could provide links to networks that universities – arguably institutions of privilege – had not accessed in the past. With their relationships, skills and lived experience, equity staff can strengthen the university's capability to co-design and deliver beneficial projects in partnership with communities.⁸

Set targets to reach population parity.

As a first step, the Accord could support the setting of industry-wide targets with the aim of achieving population parity in the academic and professional staff body by gender and cultural background, and for First Nations people and people with disability.

Canada takes a similar approach in their Research Chairs Program, where the proportion of Chairs who are racialised individuals, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, and women and gender equity-seeking groups must match their representation in the Canadian population by 2029.⁹ We note that the 2021 Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) Review recommended adding a new minimum standard to require relevant employers with 500 or more employees to commit to, achieve and report to WGEA on measurable genuine targets to improve gender equality in their workplace.

Track progress on targets through streamlined data collection.

To track progress in staff equity, diversity and inclusion, the sector should agree to streamline and standardise the collection of diversity data. There is currently variation in the definitions that organisations use for demographic categories.

The collection of diversity data is still being refined in Australia and more granular-level equity data is needed to effectively monitor progress in equity, diversity and inclusion. As Australia's data collection standards improve over time, diversity targets may be broadened to include more categories.

Hold organisations accountable for their progress against targets for equitable retention and progression of staff in the sector.

High levels of staff *retention* and *career progression* are a strong indicator of good workplaces, where all people thrive. The Accord could consider mechanisms to measure progress against the diversity targets it introduces; this would strengthen efforts towards workforce retention and progression, which are necessary to achieve parity at all levels and in all segments of the university workforce.

⁸ See for example 'boundary crossers' in Kilpatrick S, Fischer S, Koirala S, Woodroffe J, Barnes N, Groves G, Katersky Barnes R and Austin K (2022) [Informing key influencers of low SES regional, rural and remote students' education and career pathway choices: a whole of community approach](#), National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

⁹ Government of Canada (2023) [Establishing equity targets for 2021 to 2029](#), Canada Research Chairs website, accessed 29 August 2023.

A data set on employee movements (retention and progression) would provide greater insight into whether measures to improve diversity (such as improvements to promotion policies, career development options, or workplace culture and safety, for example) are achieving their intended objectives. This would mirror the approach taken by the Australian Public Service¹⁰.

SAGE subscriber universities tend to collect this data as part of their engagement with the SAGE framework and to meet reporting requirements for the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). It is important to note that data collection requirements should not impose undue reporting burdens that could divert institutional resources from the implementation of equity initiatives.

Dedicate funding for universities to implement systemic and structural workplace equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives.

A more sustainable funding model for higher education and research, as suggested by the Report, will lead to improvements in equity, diversity and inclusion. In addition, dedicated funding for diversity and inclusion initiatives will increase the value of this work and improve staff wellbeing.

Universities already rely too heavily on 'equity staff' (employees who come from marginalised backgrounds¹¹) to provide pastoral care for students, educate their colleagues on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) issues, and to contribute to the organisation's GEDI agenda.¹² Increasing the number of equity staff is one way to relieve the 'minority tax' on existing equity staff.

We note also that the review is considering measures to increase the number of higher degrees by research (HDR) enrolments. This may also be unsustainable if we do not increase the number of academic staff that have the time and skills to provide quality HDR supervision, an essential component for HDR student success.

In addition, applications for SAGE Athena Swan Bronze Awards from higher education institutions consistently demonstrated a pattern of overwork in academic roles¹³. When administrative, research and teaching workloads are burdensome and student-to-staff ratios are high, the quality of teaching is impacted.

¹⁰ [Movement of Employees | Australian Public Service Commission \(apsc.gov.au\)](https://www.apsc.gov.au/movement-of-employees)

¹¹ For brevity and to mirror the term 'equity students' used in the interim report, we use the term 'equity staff' in our submission to refer to higher education employees who come from marginalised backgrounds. People from these backgrounds are generally underrepresented in today's higher education workforce. This may include (but is not limited to) female staff, staff who identify as culturally and/or racially marginalised, First Nations staff, staff with disability and LGBTQIA+ staff.

¹² Crimmins G, Casey S and Tsouroufli M (2022) '[Intersectional barriers to women's advancement in higher education institutions rewarded for their gender equity plans](#)', *Gender and Education*.

Mahoney MR, Wilson E, Odom KL, Flowers L and Adler SR (2008) '[Minority faculty voices on diversity in academic medicine: perspectives from one school](#)', *Academic Medicine*, 83(8):781–786.

¹³ SAGE (2020) [Common issues in workload allocation](#), SAGE website, accessed 29 August 2023.

Widening the participation of the student community is likely to disproportionately increase workload for some academics.

Research shows that women tend spend more time on teaching and pastoral care¹⁴; this means that a widening of the student participation is likely to specifically increase the workload for women and diverse staff.

In 2022, the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education recommended that universities provide adequate workload allocation to academic staff, including personalised pastoral support as part of their official responsibilities and/or ensuring that there are dedicated pastoral support roles that work alongside academic staff¹⁵ for improving experiences of Indigenous students. This suggests that a widening of the participation of students should include a review of workload allocation and re-evaluation of student support and care.

Furthermore, it is important to ensure that pastoral care and teaching are explicitly included and weighted to have adequate value to research in the formal criteria for promotion or other reward mechanisms.

The Accords' suggestion to direct funding from the Higher Education Continuity Guarantee to support greater equity outcomes for students should be extended to ensure that staff have the time, resources, skills and workplace supports to deliver services that enable student equity outcomes.

Moreover, the Accord could consider in more detail EDI-specific funding to improve the attraction, retention and progression of academic *and* professional staff.¹⁶ For example, universities could be allocated funding that can be used to hire a project manager or data analyst to support workplace EDI programs, to establish a senior leadership role to lead the university's EDI portfolio, or to provide cultural competency training to staff.

¹⁴ Huppatz K, Townley C, Denson N and Bansel P (2019) [Redressing the promotion gap: practices and processes to minimise gender disparities in academic advancement](#), Western Sydney University.

Ashencaen Crabtree S and Shiel C (2019) ["Playing mother: channeled careers and the construction of gender in academia"](#), *SAGE Open*, July–September:1–14.

Sümer S and Eslen-Ziya H (2023) ['Academic women's voices on gendered division of work and care: 'working till I drop ... then dropping'](#), *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 30(1):49–65.

¹⁵ This is a recommendation from the 2022 National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) report [Interrogating relationships between student support initiatives and Indigenous student progression](#) by Bep Uink and colleagues. While the report focuses on Indigenous students, we believe the recommendations are also useful for improving equity students' experiences in general.

¹⁶ See for example the [National Science Foundation \(NSF\) ADVANCE](#) program in the US, which provides grants to enhance the systemic factors that support equity and inclusion and to mitigate the systemic factors that create inequities in the academic profession and workplaces.

About Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE)

“SAGE is the only transformative gender equity program of its kind in Australia designed to achieve sustained cultural change via a national accreditation framework. Measures to enable SAGE to be adopted by all higher education and research institutions across Australia would bring unparalleled impact.”

— *Women in STEM Decadal Plan*

SAGE was founded in 2014 as a partnership between the Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering to advance the careers of women, trans and gender diverse people in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM).

We became a fully independent entity in 2020 and expanded our remit to all higher education and research employees, including professional staff and those who work in non-STEMM disciplines.

SAGE leads GEDI progress in Australia by identifying the challenges, advocating for change, providing useful tools, and building effective partnerships and networks.

We cultivate transformational change in Australia's higher education and research sector using data driven approaches and evidence-based solutions.

As of March 2023, SAGE has 43 participating organisations across Australia. **31 of these are universities**, and the remainder are medical research institutions and publicly funded research agencies.

We support organisations to create healthy and productive workplaces by:

- providing evidence-driven strategies, capacity building, professional development and collaborative practitioner networks that foster sustainable and embedded change,
- providing a pathway to sustainable change through the internationally recognised Athena Swan Charter.

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