Gender equity in universities: should we be worried?

Glenda Strachan
Gillian Whitehouse
David Peetz
Janis Bailey
Kaye Broadbent

Glenda Strachan
Department of Management and Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing, Griffith University: g.strachan@griffith.edu.au

Gillian Whitehouse
School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland: g.whitehouse@uq.edu.au

David Peetz
Department of Employment Relations and Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing, Griffith University: d.peetz@griffith.edu.au

Janis Bailey
Department of Employment Relations and Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing, Griffith University: j.bailey@griffith.edu.au

Kaye Broadbent
Department of Employment Relations and Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing, Griffith University: k.broadbent@griffith.edu.au
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Abstract
In the past decade universities have experienced profound long-term changes. Operating with increased ‘business’ orientation and measurement of operations, they are distinctly different places of work compared with ten years ago. In Australia, these changes have been coupled with major changes in industrial relations. This paper explores in broad terms what some of these changes might mean for gender equity in Australian universities. It brings together a range of literature to examine demographic trends within universities, changes to university strategy and management, and the current debates about the position of women in universities. The paper concludes that gender equity is yet to be achieved with significant remaining barriers in academic and senior positions. Changes in university management have increased pressures on staff that may reinforce a male model of work, while industrial relations changes have decreased the transparency of pay setting schemes thus increasing the possibility for discrimination.

University Workforce Demography
Australian universities are facing ‘a crisis’ in their staffing arrangements as between one fifth and one third of their academic staff will retire in the first decade of the twentieth century (Hugo 2005, 207 & 225). The university workforce is ageing and university lecturers are the oldest group of professionals in Australia, with 60 per cent aged over 45 years. Fifty per cent of the ‘lecturer and tutor’ group was aged over 45 in 2001, as compared with 33 per cent of the total Australian workforce (Hugo 2005, 215). The sector is therefore characterised by ‘age heaping’ and a concentration of workers in the older age group as well as gender imbalance (Hugo 2005). As a result, over the next decade Australian universities face a large recruitment task in the context of the most competitive international market ever (Hugo 2005, 227). Hugo emphasises that ‘there are real challenges in being able to attract high-quality staff members to replace those being lost’ as the age breakdown of academic staff shows that there has been a ‘“lost generation” of potential university academics, those currently aged in their twenties and thirties’ (Hugo 2005, 225).

The labour market for academics and skilled professionals is international and it has never been easier for highly skilled Australians to work overseas (Hugo 2005, 226; Potts 2005). Few detailed studies of university recruitment have been undertaken in Australia although it is clear that discipline areas such as accounting and finance and divisions such as university libraries face major difficulties in finding teaching, research and professional staff (Whitmell 2005; Subramaniam 2003). Shortages of academic and professional staff are international, especially in the health sciences and nursing, teacher education, business (for example Journal of Nursing Education 2007 special edition on nursing faculty; Swartz, Swartz and Liang 2007; Marshall, Dombrowski and Garner 2006; Plummel et al 2006; Twombly et al 2006; Moon 2004). These are all areas where women form a majority or significant proportion of academic staff and potential recruits.

In the face of this skill loss and international skill shortage, a major strategy for universities has to be ways to retain staff and ‘it is clear that impending labor market deficits make it even more imperative that universities involve women to a much greater extent than in the past purely from the perspective of the need to recruit sufficient high-quality academics to replace...
the expected loss over the next decade’ (Hugo 2005, 227). Effective policies designed to promote gender equity have a positive impact on the attraction and retention of women (Kramar 2007) and universities have been pro-active in the provision of equity policies (EOWA 2005; Probert 2005). Yet a wide variety of statistics concerning pay and progression show that full gender equity has by no means been achieved and the slow rate of progress may have ceased in the last couple of years. The rapid and far-reaching trend to business-like forms of organisation in universities (Marginson 2002, 420), the promotion of individualised reward systems, escalating performance measurement systems and increasing work intensity have profoundly changed universities as workplaces, with all indications being that full attainment of gender equity is less likely now than it was a decade ago.

Changes in universities

Operational culture

Gender equity needs to be contextualised within the dynamics of the broader political economy of higher education. Australian universities ‘are being transformed by profound long-term changes’ (Marginson 2000, 23) that are reshaping academic work and the academic profession and reshaping the roles and importance of non-academic, professional and general staff. Shifts to a market orientation and business-like forms of organisation, and the consequent changes in management practices in universities, make them distinctly different places of employment compared with 10 years ago (Marginson 2002). Labels such as the ‘performative’ university, which focuses on measurable and marketable consumer satisfaction, with an increased focus on performance outcomes of students and staff are used (Fletcher et al 2007; Blackmore and Sachs 2003, 141; Prichard and Deem 1999).

This ‘conversion of education from process to product’ with primacy given to financial imperatives and quality assurance directives (Howie 2005) has profound implications for work organisation and has influenced the working conditions and climate for staff (Sappey 2006). Willmott described the implications of these processes in detail concluding that there was a reduction ‘in areas of discretion from the control of labor – for example, by redesigning work to restrict these areas, or by increasing levels of supervision and surveillance’ (Willmott 1995, 998). Indeed, recent reforms in the UK and elsewhere have sought to shift the orientation of academic labor in the direction of exchange value; and, as the work of academics has been represented in terms of exchange value,…students have been constituted as ‘customers’,….academics are drawn into this commodity discourse as they are encouraged to identify and treat students as customers, and aspire to receive ‘excellent’ ratings by the…quality assessors for their services (Willmott 1995, 1002).

There is pressure on universities to ‘adopt more formalized, centralized, and bureaucratized methods of managing their teaching operatives who wo/man the production and delivery process’, a process which seems ‘destined to erode and displace professional values’ (Willmott 1995, 1021). What can be measured is measured and there is a shift to what is measured is valued. Willmott concludes that academics in the U.K. now find themselves exposed to a damaging regime in which external monitors have them surrounded, and have been moving to colonize remaining areas of autonomy. The prospect is for a shift toward an academic labor process in which managerial direction and control stimulates, and is facilitated by, a more calculative approach among individual academics who, in response to
intensifying pressures, neglect or marginalize activities that are invisible to performance measures’ (Willmott 1995, 1025).

In the UK there is emerging evidence that ‘these new labour regimes are highly gendered, seriously disadvantaging women academics in areas such as contracts, conditions, promotions and pay’ (Fletcher et al 2007, 437).

In Australia there is an increasing divide between types of universities (Marginson 2006; Potts 2005) leading to a possible two-tiered or multi-tiered system, with ‘second tier universities’ ‘less well resourced and unable to offer the bonus systems and resource incentives now emerging in some universities through individual contracts’ (Sappey 2006, section 8.2.2). Within universities the divisions between groups of staff are likely to increase, so that, for example, there will be divisions in disciplines, workload composition (teaching versus research staff), type of contract (secure versus insecure), and hours worked. The increasing work intensity for university staff is well documented. For example, new international activities have been added to local activities with little increase in permanent staff so that academics ‘day-to-day functions are under greater pressure than ever’ (Marginson 2000, 29; Potts 2005). All these changes potentially have profound implications for gender equity and pay equity.

**Industrial relations**

Since 1993 enterprise bargaining at individual universities has resulted in differential pay scales between universities, and in recent years there have been increasing moves to individualise pay within universities (Rosewarne 2005). Anecdotal evidence confirms the presence of variable pay schemes in universities, but their extent is unknown. These are known by a variety of terms, including ‘market based pay’, ‘performance related pay’, ‘payment by results’ and ‘merit pay’, and may be transparent or confidential. Variable pay schemes in universities may reward for geographical location and cost of living; may provide across-the-board above-agreement salary supplements for staff at particular levels of appointment; may involve discipline-based loadings, ostensibly based on difficulty of recruitment or relative pay rates outside universities; and may offer loadings to attract or retain sought after staff (these are frequently confidential). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of individual confidential loadings has increased. At the end of 2006, three per cent of university employees had individual Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) (Bishop 2007). Research in other industries shows AWAs can be used in polarised ways: at the top end of the labour market to increase salaries, introduce non-transparency and (in some industries) discourage unionisation, and to cut costs at the bottom end (Peetz 2007). Overall, the changes can lead to greater capacity for non-transparency and introduction of gender bias.

Variable pay schemes have two main impacts on gender pay equity. Firstly, if variable pay is concentrated among higher-classified employees, it will necessarily increase the gender pay gap in universities, given the strong vertical segregation. Variable pay schemes have been consistently found to boost the pay of higher grade relative to lower grade workers (Casey et al 1992; IRS 1992). The largest and most sophisticated study on pay system formalisation and gender equity (Elvira and Graham 2002), using personnel data for over 8000 employees in a large US financial organisation, shows that the more women in a job, and the lower the formalisation, the lower the variable earnings of individual workers. Secondly, while forms of ‘market based pay’ according to discipline and difficulty of recruitment may be argued as being related to observable, measurable characteristics, these claims are often not subject to testing (Rubery 1995, 644). If discrimination exists in the broader labour market, then
recourse to ‘market rates’ is likely to further widen the gender wage gap (Rubery 1995, 645). Salary on appointment can also be variable, as most positions have incremental scales and, in theory at least, staff may be appointed at any point on the scale. The negotiation literature shows that bargaining over initial starting salaries can be considered a game better played by male than female recruits (Babcock and Laschever 2003; Barron 2003), although Probert’s study within Australian academe found that women were as likely as men to negotiate over entry point, and equally likely to be successful (Probert, Ewer and Whiting 1998). While variable pay schemes do contain the potential to identify and remedy pay inequity (Dickens 1998; Rubery 1995; Kessler 1994), it is more likely that the increasing use of non-transparent forms of variable pay distributed at managers’ discretion will provide fertile soil for unconscious gender biases to operate (Reskin 2000).

**Research Quality Framework (RQF)**

The RQF being undertaken in Australia will have profound impacts on academic work. In a similar exercise in the UK, men were nearly twice as likely as women to be counted as research active; failure to perform well in this exercise has a negative impact on career opportunities, especially promotion prospects (AUT 2004). Fletcher et al (2007, 450) detail the ways in which the new research culture is shaped in gendered ways, concluding from the study of one UK university that ‘research capital, culture and processes were constructed and operated in such a way as to systematically militate against women’s full and equal involvement in research’. In Australia women are under-represented and almost absent in the higher levels of research teams and research management (Bell and Bentley 2005). The RQF exercise, in whatever shape it takes, is likely to widen the divide between teaching and research staff and the divide between institutions. This could be seen in 2007 as universities prepared for the RQF with the outcome being a privileging of research and certain types of research outputs, so that there have been consequences irrespective of its introduction.

**Gender equity in universities**

While Australian universities have a strong record on gender policies (Winchester et al 2006; Probert 2005, 51; Burton 1997), major challenges to the goal of equity remain including slow progression of women into management, concentration of women in lower classifications, lower retention of women, possible reduction in pay equity for women, disproportionate numbers in casual positions and work intensification (EOWA 2005, 30-35). Universities have displayed ‘remarkable persistence of unequal outcomes for men and women in terms of pay and status’ (Probert 2005, 50). This is easiest to see through an examination of academic women’s progression through the university hierarchy. Aggregations of general/professional staff are less useful as these combine different streams of work, for example administrative and technical, and there is wide variation in these and between departments.

In the past two decades women’s participation as academics has increased, but predominantly at the lowest levels. While women formed 22 per cent of academic staff 1985, this had increased to 39 per cent in 2002, arguably because women were the beneficiaries of the trend towards higher tenure rates as a result of the 1998 HECE Award (Carrington and Pratt 2003, 5). The HECE decision produced a sharper rise in tenure rates for females than for males in the late 1990s due to the higher precariousness of women’s employment overall. However, the HECE Award is no longer operative, and therefore cost pressures are increasing the number of fixed term and casual positions, which are predominantly at lower levels, thus potentially affecting women disproportionately.
While there have been changes in the past decade that have increased the proportion of women at the level of Level C (Senior Lecturer), women remain under-represented in full-time and on-going positions and in senior roles (DEST 2006; EOWA 2005, 32). In 2006 women constituted 41 per cent of academic staff but only 23 per cent of those at professorial levels (D and E) (see tables 1 and 2). Women’s representation in the professoriate (D and E) has reached 21 per cent, but this varies considerably between universities, with some as low as 14 per cent (DEST 2006). Reports to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) allow disaggregation of numbers at Levels D (Associate Professor) and E (Professor). These clearly show lower percentages of women at Level E, and show variation between universities, for example ANU had 14 per cent Level E compared with 27 per cent at the University of Western Sydney. Change across time can be halting at the upper levels. Table 3 provides longitudinal data for one university (chosen because its reports to EOWA provide a decade of statistics) which shows an increase of 24 to 36 per cent women at Level C from 1997 to 2006 but shows a bumpy road of five to eight per cent at Level E. Numbers themselves are small, so in 2006 there were 19 women at Level D and 5 at Level E, compared with 57 and 54 men respectively. Carrington and Pratt (2003, 4) comment that at the current rate of change it would take nearly 50 years to achieve equal numbers of men and women.

**Table 1: Academic Staff in Australian Universities, 2006**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level A</td>
<td>4314</td>
<td>3702</td>
<td>8016</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level B</td>
<td>6503</td>
<td>6837</td>
<td>13340</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level C</td>
<td>3524</td>
<td>6102</td>
<td>9626</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Level C</td>
<td>2115</td>
<td>7119</td>
<td>9234</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16456</td>
<td>23760</td>
<td>40216</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DEST 2006.

**Table 2: Academic Staff in Australian Universities, 2006: % by Level and Sex**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level A</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level C</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Level C</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DEST 2006.

**Table 3: Murdoch University Academic Staff by Level and Sex 1997-2006**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Level E</th>
<th>Level D</th>
<th>Level C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Reports to EOWA, 2002-06.
A majority (63 per cent) (DEST 2006) of the general (non-academic) staff are women, yet
general staff career issues are a neglected field of enquiry (Probert, Ewer and Whiting 1998),
a fact that has not changed. General staff continue to be overrepresented in lower
classification levels and casual and part-time employment, and underrepresented in technical
streams, higher classification levels and executive positions. EOWA (2005) data indicates a
reduction in pay equity for female general staff since 2002.

Gender pay inequality is the end product of multiple interrelated causes operating across society
as a whole (Whitehouse 2004), particularly in families/households, the education system and
the labour market; it is perpetuated by (often concealed) gender-biased assumptions that play
out in a wide range of settings, including employing organisations and wage setting
institutions. Women’s unequal distribution through the academic hierarchy is critical (Ward
2001; Probert, Ewer and Whiting 1998). Yet there is an incomplete explanation about the
nature and causes of men’s and women’s unequal distribution throughout the organisational
hierarchy, and thus for the gender pay gap.

The totality of research internationally makes it clear that the explanation of women’s
disadvantage in academic work is multi-factorial. Numerous factors influence the uneven
representation of women in universities and the persistence of the gender pay gap. Explanations include:

- the long working hours culture (Currie, Theile and Harris 2002, 80);
- features of the appointment, promotion and reclassification processes that
disadvantage women (van den Brink, Brouns and Waslander 2006; Vu and Doughney
2006; Probert 2005; Castleman et al 1995);
- lack of role models, mentors and supporters and less access/support for women in the
research environment (Bell and Bentley 2005; AUT 2004);
- gendered notions of merit and success in academic work (Thornton 2004; Hearn 2001;
Morley 1999). The typical academic career path is structured according to a male
perception of success, and the system of meritocracy in universities reinforces this
masculine approach to career success: ‘meritocratic systems of inequality reflect and
reproduce the discursive practices of masculinity that present disadvantages to a
majority of women and some men’ (Knights and Richards 2003).
- the nature of universities as ‘underbounded systems’ (Alderfer 1980) in which a lack
of clear boundaries around time, roles and authority can derail women more often than
men (Ely and Myerson 2000);
- more frequent career interruptions associated with childbirth and child care,
derailing their competitiveness (Probert 2005);
- increasing insecure forms of employment and casualisation (Junor 2004; Kimber
2003);
- the gendered micropolitics of universities, that is the subtle and complex ways in
which discrimination takes place (Catalyst 2007; Morley 2006; Deem 2003):
‘gendered social practices become so normalised that the injustices they perpetuate are
utterly transparent’ (Chesterman, Ross-Smith and Peters 2004, 2).

Small advantages that favour men, and inequities that disadvantage women – but many of
them over time – accumulate to create large differences (Valian 1998). Knights and Richards
 liken academic life to an obstacle race rather than a 300-metre sprint (2003, 219). The title of
Caplan’s 1993 book about women in academia, *Lifting a Ton of Feathers*, provides another
metaphor of the nature of cumulative disadvantage. A pervasive metaphor in the literature is
that of the ‘leaking pipeline’ to describe women’s progression through academic careers. It is used both descriptively, to indicate that women ‘drop out’ of the system (or, perhaps more frequently, are caught and held at certain points along the pipeline), and also normatively, to indicate that there is an unavoidable time lag between policy change and organisational change but that eventually gender balance will be reached (Castleman et al 1995; Allen and Castleman 2001). Allen and Castleman (2001, 151) refer to the latter as the ‘pipeline fallacy’ that ‘obscures the need for active intervention in employment processes’. However, when used critically, the pipeline concept can be useful. Vu and Doughney (2006) use a flow (or transition) model to analyse staffing changes as a new way of conceptualising the ‘leaking pipeline’ and examine the pathway to the professoriate for women at Victoria University.

There is significant – as yet unresolved – disagreement in the literature about the causes of women’s uneven distribution across the academic ranks. Probert (2005, 51) has recently asserted that ‘most of the factors that are widely used to explain the fact that women remain concentrated in the lower levels of the academic hierarchy are not supported by credible evidence’. She and other Australian researchers (Burton 1997; Winchester et al 2006) emphasise Australian universities’ strong record on gender policies, although studies that look in new places (for example Vu and Doughney’s 2006 research on external appointments to the professoriate) have found evidence of systemic bias. Probert (2005, 58) finds overall that women have less ‘human capital’ than men, specifically less formal qualifications and work experience, and that their career strategies differ; ‘they do not seem to attack the career structure as vigorously as men, with significant proportions appearing to stop climbing just as they are getting near the peaks’. Her qualitative research at UNSW among Level C academics concludes that the absence of women in the professoriate ‘would appear to be linked to the way households organize the division between paid and unpaid work rather than to discrimination against women in the workplace’ (Probert 2005, 65). Probert’s work is controversial. While she accuses other researchers of ‘looking in the wrong place’, she herself appears to simplify a set of complex factors and, in her most recent work, to fix on the domestic sphere as the culprit for the clustering of women at Level C and below. Probert’s work runs the risk of adopting a limited view of preference theory in the vein of Hakim (2000), rather than applying a more complex understanding of the phenomenon of adaptive preferences, whereby women adjust their preferences in response to persistent gender inequality (Leahy and Doughney 2006; Nussbaum 2000).

The totality of research internationally makes it clear, however, that the explanation of women’s disadvantage in academia is multi-factorial. Valian suggests that deep-seated ‘gender schemas’ explain continuing inequity, meaning implicit and largely non-conscious beliefs about sex differences that affect the expectations of men and women. Small advantages that favour men, and inequities that disadvantage women – but many of them over time – accumulate to create large differences (Valian, 1998), a finding that goes back to Merton’s work in the 1940s on the importance of cumulative advantage in science (Merton [1968] 1973). It is not sufficient to allow women to meet the criteria for academic success on terms that have been defined by men and represent their life experiences (Rapoport 2002; Bailyn, 2003). Gender and organisation are mutually constitutive; gender shapes the organisation and its division of labour, at the same time as organisations and work shape gender relations (see Benschop 2001; Benschop and Doorewaard 1998). Thus the employment relations practices of universities – such as paid parental leave, rights to part-time work and practices such as 48/52 working arrangements – are necessary but not sufficient to create gender equity, as they do not deal with the career consequences of
women’s choices. Work practices, structures, and cultural definitions of competence and success need to be embedded in the acceptance of the notion of a worker whose identity and commitments are legitimately anchored in both the occupational and the private worlds, Fletcher’s so-called ‘integrated worker’ (Fletcher 1999).

Conclusion
The implications of recent operational and structural changes in universities for gender equity are unclear (Chesterman, Ross-Smith and Peters 2005; Thomas and Davies 2002):
While policy drivers for change are diverse, there is stability in women's under-representation in academic posts in general and senior posts in particular. Women are entering the academy in some locations as students, but the academy is slow to change in terms of equity whereas it has been rapidly transformed in relation to new managerialism and neo-liberalism (Morley 2005).
These changes are occurring in universities in the English-speaking world yet there has been negligible investigation of the implications for equity and gender equity. Drivers for equity exist in the Australian context in the form of anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, and universities are arguably the most outstanding industry performers according to EOWA criteria. Yet major changes in the sector such as the market orientation of universities, various forms of measurement of practices and staff, and increasing individualisation of pay and conditions, can work against the achievement of equity. Indeed, they pose new challenges to be overcome. In the face of an impending demographic crisis in universities there is little activity designed to address these issues or consider gender equity.

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