

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0130

Navigating Sexism in the Academy

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Abstract: This paper explores how women can best navigate the sexism of the academy that enables men to hold the majority of professorial and leadership roles. The paper reports on analyses of Australian government statistics and publicly available data on the numbers and proportions of men and women at different levels of academia, as well as women's narratives around their experiences of navigating careers in higher education. The study aims to better understand the particular sexism of the academy and what responses might be possible. Drawing on the work of scholars including Heijstra, Einarsdóttir, Pétursdóttir and Steinþórsdóttir (2017) and Macfarlane and Burg (2019), the paper makes the case for change and provides a possible blueprint for the future. The findings are relevant to the career progression of half of the world's academic population – who currently operate in, and unwittingly support, a highly sexist and limiting culture.

Paper: Men dominate the upper levels of Australian academia. The latest available figures from the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (from 2019) show:

- 86% more men than women at associate professor and professor levels D and E (10,363 men, 5,562 women) – these levels are reported together in Australia;
- 11% more men than women at senior lecturer level C (6,355 men, 5,724 women);
- 25% more women than men at lecturer level B (7,428 men, 9,253 women); and
- 15% more women than men at associate lecturer level A (4,426 men and 5,093 women) (DESE, 2021).

Australian university leaders are nearly three times more likely to be a man than a woman. As at January, 2021, of 37 public university chancellors, just nine were women (24%) and 28 (76%) were

men. For vice-chancellors at the same time: 10 (27%) were women and 27 (73%) were men. Together, this means that in January 2021, men held 55 of the 74 top jobs in Australian higher education.

During 2020, there was a big opportunity for change and greater gender equity. Vice-chancellors at 18 of Australia's 37 public universities either announced their departure from, or left, their role. As at January 2021, women had been appointed in just four of the 15 (27%) interim or ongoing replacements made. Two of these four women moved from one vice-chancellor position to another. In 11 of the 15 announced vice-chancellor replacements – 73% of cases – a man won the role (Devlin, 2021).

Given that advancement in the academy does not rely on physical strength – a documented advantage that men generally have over women – the ongoing and confirmed dominance of men over women in the professoriate and in senior leadership in Australian universities is curious. Until you ask the women about why they think things are as they are. While the numerical data above are shocking, they are not as shocking as the narratives women share of their experiences of sexism in the sector. Most women have a sexism story, many have numerous such stories, and they highlight remarkably common experiences.

Devlin (2021) documents many of these stories. Examples include women in higher education being: harassed; stalked; lied about; disparaged; gaslighted; emailed in the middle of the night; repeatedly denied access to research funds; gossiped about to the point of reputational damage; put under performance management for having the 'wrong' style; threatened with being removed from positions; expected to work while seriously ill; threatened with legal action; reminded of the importance of male colleagues' work and feelings; and forced to resign.

A more benign but very widespread story is the one about gendered expectations. One example is that women are expected to do the caring work and the housework – at home and at work. Heijstra and colleagues (2017) argue that the fact that women carry the main responsibility for domestic and caring tasks at home follows them into the academic arena. MacFarlane and Burg (2019) find that female professors are more likely to emphasise the importance of academic citizenship – especially through mentoring – compared to their male counterparts and suggest the ongoing effects of 'academic housework' hold back the careers of academic women.

While universities should do something about gender inequity, they haven't to date and don't generally appear to be making this a top strategic priority as higher education begins to map its post-COVID future. While academic women wait for the mostly male university leadership to use their power for the advancement of women and in some cases, surrender that power in the process,

Devlin (2021) suggests women start doing academic and other housework at a much lower level of intensity and quality than they do at present. She argues that the time, energy and goodwill that is saved from de-emphasising these activities that are expected of women but do not help them, can be redirected to endeavours that 'count' for women's promotion and advancement.

Such activities include: preparing an advancement strategy; research; profile building; self-promotion; networking; applying for awards; connecting with the media; methodically gathering and documenting evidence of contributions; getting on the radar of decision-makers; taking leadership opportunities; avoiding common traps; seeking help; building a support squad; and proactively countering the sexist forces working against women (Devlin, 2021).

The paper is relevant to the career progression of half of the world's academic population – who currently operate in, and unwittingly support, a highly sexist and limiting academic culture.

References: Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020). Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2019 Staff data. Accessed June 25, 2021 from: <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/53179>

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