Submission to the Australian Universities Accord discussion paper

11 April 2023

Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Accord. SAGE is the national accreditation body for gender equity, diversity and inclusion (**GEDI**) in Australia's higher education and research sector.

Our submission will focus on developing sector-wide solutions to advance gender equity diversity and inclusion.

While universities have made some progress towards gender equity, diversity and inclusion, there is some way to go, particularly in relation to research and employment practices.

Investing in GEDI strengthens a university's ability to deliver its purpose. An equitable, inclusive university is more likely to attract and retain the diverse staff and students it needs to serve the diverse Australian community. By breaking up the homogeneity in higher education, diverse and inclusive teams also drive greater innovation and creativity.

There are already some sector norms that provide universities with advantages in this area: the use of standardised pay scales, including salary ranges in job advertisements, and superannuation benefits and paid parental leave entitlements, to name a few.

The Accord can encourage universities to build on these successes and adopt progressive, cutting-edge practices in GEDI.

Q2. How can the diverse missions of Australian higher education providers be supported, taking into account their different operating contexts and communities they serve (for example regional universities)?

The Accord has the potential to create a widespread cultural shift towards recognising gender equity, diversity and inclusion as integral to excellence in teaching, learning and research.

Recommendation: Develop a sector-wide strategy to improve gender equity, diversity and inclusion.

This should:

a) encourage a sector-wide commitment to embedding gender equity, diversity and inclusion policies and practices.
b) promote practices that make the higher education sector a safe and respectful place to work and learn.

a) The strategy should encourage a sector-wide commitment to embedding gender equity, diversity and inclusion policies and practices.

Although many universities have goals and strategies in place to pursue GEDI, there has not been substantial sector-wide progress. Advancements such as increased women in senior leadership contrast with stalled progress elsewhere, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields of research and education, such as STEMM.

In addition to action in individual institutions, broad advancements in GEDI will require a sector-wide, collaborative approach to address various interconnected challenges. The Accord is an opportunity to transcend institutional silos and drive societal-level change through a national sector-wide strategy.

An intersectional approach is critical if these sector-wide improvements are to be successful. Research shows that women and men from marginalised groups can face multiple and compounding disadvantages when participating and progressing in education and the labour force. GEDI initiatives that focus on one dimension of marginalisation (such as gender, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, cultural background or disability) fail to recognise the intersecting disadvantages faced by people who have multiple marginalised identities. As a result, some initiatives only benefit a small fraction of the population they were meant to help – usually the people who are more privileged. While there is growing awareness of intersectionality, many organisations struggle to apply this concept. Universities, with their wealth of expertise in the social sciences, humanities and business, can further the public's understanding of intersectionality and demonstrate leadership in its effective application.

To improve GEDI across the sector, universities should:

- **improve GEDI for *all* its students and employees (including academic and professional staff) at every stage of the student or employee lifecycle.** There should be holistic focus on attracting, retaining and progressing underrepresented and marginalised groups.
- **develop a shared understanding of what progress, outcomes and impact mean.**[1] This enables the development of meaningful sector-wide metrics for GEDI success.
- ***regularly* and *publicly* report on the progress, outcomes and impact they have achieved in GEDI.** This encourages institutional accountability and promotes an evidence-based approach to continuously improve in GEDI. It can also promote healthy competition by motivating institutions to outperform each other in GEDI.

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[1] For example, the SAGE Athena Swan framework uses the following definitions:
Progress/output: A deliverable produced as part of an action; **Outcome:** A measurable change that occurs as a result of implementing an action (or group of actions); **Impact:** A change to the self-reported lived experience of staff (and/or students) as a result of removing or reducing a barrier.

An example framework: Athena Swan

Athena Swan is the only internationally recognised framework for gender equity, diversity and inclusion. SAGE administers the framework in Australia.

At the time of writing, 31 Australian universities subscribe to SAGE. Of these, 30 have achieved the first level of Athena Swan accreditation, recognising they had established a foundation for transformational change.

Senior Leaders from all SAGE subscribers make the following commitment.

The Athena Swan Senior Leaders' Commitment

In committing to the principles of the Athena Swan Charter, we recognise that we join a global community with a shared goal of advancing gender equity, diversity and inclusion in higher education and research.

Each Institution is at a different stage in its gender equity, diversity and inclusion journey, and has different challenges and priority areas for action.

In determining our institutional priorities, and designing and implementing interventions, we commit to:

- ensuring that gender equity, diversity and inclusion work is appropriately resourced, distributed, recognised, and rewarded.
- undertaking transparent and rigorous self-assessment processes, analysing institutional structures, systems, and cultures to identify the barriers to attraction, retention and progression for staff and students, and thus to gender equity, diversity and inclusion.
- designing initiatives based on institutional data, and national and global evidence of best practice.
- monitoring, evaluating, and publicly reporting on progress made, challenges experienced, and impact achieved, to inform continuous improvement.
- actively incorporating Indigenous knowledges and perspectives to address the specific inequities and injustices experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff and students.
- consciously considering all genders, recognising that gender is not binary, and that trans and gender diverse people face specific inequities because of their gender identities.
- taking an intersectional approach to advancing gender equity, diversity and inclusion, recognising that people of any particular identity are not a homogeneous group.
- engaging with those most impacted by inequitable practice to proactively redesign and reshape structures, systems and culture.
- increasing the safety and wellbeing of staff and students by proactively and transparently preventing and responding to bullying, harassment, sexual harassment, gender-based violence and discrimination.
- embedding change in institutional governance and accountability structures; actively and visibly championing and promoting gender equity, diversity and inclusion in our Institutions, the Athena Swan community, and across the sector; and holding ourselves and other senior leaders accountable for driving sustainable transformational change.

b) The strategy should promote practices that make the higher education sector a safe and respectful place to work and learn.

Our vision is for Australia's higher education and research institutions to be free from discrimination, bullying, harassment and assault.

Inequity, social exclusion and a lack of diversity are the root causes of bullying and harassment. It is important to recognise that many cultural biases, roles and stereotypes are learned and perpetuated at a societal level; that is, these problems exist within as well as outside universities.

For respect and safety to be the norm across the sector, GEDI must be actively promoted in every higher education and research institution.

Using sexual harassment as an example, we illustrate why we need to look beyond individual university approaches to GEDI and change the fundamental 'way of doing things' in the higher education and research sector:

> ### University power structures
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> In the higher education and research context, the imbalance of power strongly deters students or junior academics from reporting misconduct by faculty members, who may damage their future career prospects in retaliation.[2] This is more likely to happen when the perpetrator is a 'star researcher' and/or holds a powerful position.
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> On the rare occasions where a formal report is made, cases tend to be ignored, dismissed or mishandled to protect the institution's funding and reputation.[3] As a result, perpetrators often move between institutions and continue to harm others with little to no repercussions.
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> ### Cross-institutional nature of higher education and research
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> University staff and students often interact with those from medical research institutes and publicly funded research agencies through joint research projects, work placement programs, conferences or employee movements.
>
> ### Hypercasualisation of the university workforce
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> The Respect@Work report found that casual employees were less likely to speak up about sexual harassment or seek remedies when it occurred, due to fear of losing their jobs. This was compounded by the fact that casual employees were easy to replace and usually hold lower-level positions with little power.

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[2] Young SL and Wiley KK (2021) 'Erased: why faculty sexual misconduct is prevalent and how we could prevent it', *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 27(3):276–300.

[3] Ellinghaus K, Henningham N, Kaladelfos A, Piper A, Rademaker L, Rees A, Silverstein J, Tomsic M and Wolfe N (2018) 'It destroyed my research career': survey of sexual and gender-based discrimination and abuse in Australian academia, Australian Women's History Network.

Given the prevalence of casual and short-term contracts in universities, the workforce is especially vulnerable. Indeed, the third highest proportion of sexual harassment incidents (10%) occurred in the education and training industry, even though the industry only makes up 8% of the Australian workforce.

Safe workplaces can be created by:

- **Decentralising power in universities.** The Accord could seek to reform academic hierarchies and funding systems that allow individuals (senior-ranking academics) to wield excessive power over others in the institution.
  Decentralising power can also reduce the risks faced by survivors and bystanders in coming forward with reports of bullying, harassment or assault.

- **Developing a national reporting system/process for bullying, harassment and assault**,[4] with the aim to encourage reporting, provide complainants with victim-centred support and a pathway to justice, detect serial perpetrators, improve monitoring of complaint numbers/types and enhance transparency.

  For example, survivors of campus sexual assault can use the Callisto *matching escrow system*[5] to make a private record of the incident and their perpetrator. If another survivor submits a record with the same perpetrator, both survivors are alerted and a trained support person will help them navigate their legal options.

- **Promote a culture of valuing everyone's contributions.** The sector should identify and agree to stop practices that have the potential to be exploitative – for example, an overreliance on student labour (particularly PhD students, undergraduate research assistants, and unpaid internships), excessive use of casual and short-term employment contracts, and the use of adjunct appointments for unpaid teaching work.

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[4] The features of this system must be developed in consultation with experts in the relevant discrimination, harassment and assault laws and trauma-informed practice.

[5] Callisto (n.d.) *Callisto Vault*, Callisto website, accessed 2 April 2023. For an overview of how escrows can be used to detect misconduct, see Ayres I and Unkovic C (2012) 'Information escrows', Michigan Law Review, 111(2):145–196.

Q5 How do the current structures of institutions, regulation and funding in higher education help or hinder Australia's ability to meet these challenges? What needs to change?

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

- A commitment to gender equity, diversity and inclusion must be a requirement and part of the assessment criteria for government research funding, for example in relation to:
- The institution's GEDI strategy and performance[6]
- 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.

There are several Australian and international examples of linked funding:

- **The European Union** introduced funding that links to gender equity, diversity and inclusion. To be eligible for Horizon Europe funding,[7] applicants must show that:[8]
  - 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.

  Applications are also ranked on the gender balance of the research teams.

  Horizon Europe also offers dedicated funding for gender and intersectional research and the development of inclusive gender equality policies.

- In **Ireland**, top research funding agencies have made Athena Swan gender equality accreditation a condition of funding.[9] To be eligible for funding, higher education institutions must apply for an Athena Swan Institutional Bronze Award by the end of

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[6] For example, the institution has a GEDI action plan and/or can demonstrate progress, outcomes and impact against that action plan.

[7] Horizon Europe is the EU's 2021–2027 framework programme for research and innovation. It was preceded by Horizon 2020, which was delivered from 2014–2020. Both programmes evaluate proposals based on the gender balance of the research teams and the way gender is integrated into the research, but Gender Equality Plans were only required from 2021 onwards. An interim evaluation report for Horizon 2020 will be published in December 2023.

[8] European Commission, (n.d.) *Gender quality in research and innovation*, European Commission website, accessed 31 March 2023.

[9] 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.

2019, and they must retain that Award until they obtain an Athena Swan Institutional Silver Award.

- The **Snow Medical Research Foundation** – Australia's largest donor to medical research – will only provide new funding to research organisations that meet gender balance benchmarks in leadership, recruitment, promotions and honorary awards.[10]

The above approaches could be complemented by affirmative action in funding allocation. For example, the **National Health and Medical Research Council** (NHMRC) has set targets to award equal numbers of Investigator Grants to women and men.[11] Structural priority funding is also allocated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers in selected NHMRC grant schemes.

While most of these examples focus on gender, the Accord should 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.

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

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

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.

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 enable organisations to achieve meaningful systemic, structural and cultural change by:

- accrediting and granting awards for gender equity, diversity and inclusion. We are the only Australian organisation licensed to grant awards under the internationally recognised Athena Swan Charter;

- raising awareness of and building capacity to improve gender equity, diversity and inclusion; and

- collaborating with like-minded organisations to support initiatives aimed at addressing systemic barriers to gender equity, diversity and inclusion.

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