

PROGRESS AND BACKSLIDING: Gender pay gap in the university and science research sectors report card

PROGRESS IN GENDER EQUITY IN THE UNIVERSITY AND RESEARCH SECTORS

Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) has undertaken a new analysis of the latest Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) gender pay gap data for the university and research sectors.

SAGE delivers the internationally recognised Athena Swan program, supporting universities, medical research institutes and public sector science research agencies to identify and address the systemic barriers driving gender inequality and the gender pay gap. The 38 organisations participating in the program are known as SAGE members.

An organisation's gender pay gap is a key indicator of how well it is tackling the structural and cultural barriers that drive gender inequality and how much progress it has yet to make.

Key Findings

It is a tale of opposing outcomes: those taking action are reducing their gender pay gap. Those that aren't are seeing their gender pay gap widen.

- Organisations taking active steps to address the gender pay gap through SAGE's Athena Swan program (members) have a median total remuneration gender pay gap that is 37% lower than their sector peers (3.8 percentage points).
- The gap between universities in the SAGE program and those outside it has tripled over three years, as the gender pay gap has continued to grow for those not taking action.
- Of the 13 universities with a gender pay gap in the target range (+/-5%), nine are SAGE members.
- Almost nine in 10 SAGE members have taken tangible action to address their gender pay gap. The data is unambiguous: the further along the SAGE Athena Swan program an organisation is, the lower its gender pay gap.
- At SAGE member universities, women now make up more than half of all governing body members, an 11.8 percentage point advantage over non-member universities. This demonstrates that SAGE members are driving gender equity improvements across every level of their institutions, not just in pay.



Sector by Sector Gender Pay Gap: The Member Advantage

UNIVERSITIES – THREE YEARS OF DIVERGING OUTCOMES

Average median total remuneration Gender Pay Gap	SAGE members	Non-members	Difference
2024–25	6.4%	9.5%	–3.1 pp
2023–24	6.8%	9.0%	–2.2 pp
2022–23	7.9%	8.9%	–1.0 pp
Change over 2 years	–1.5 pp	+0.6 pp	Members improved; non-members worsened

The data tells a stark story: while SAGE member universities have on average steadily cut their gender pay gap over the past three years, non-member universities have gone backwards with their median total remuneration gender pay gap higher today than it was in 2022–2023.



*Average median total remuneration gender pay gap

**Average median total remuneration gender pay gap for the university sector was 7.4% in 2024–2025

SAGE members dominate the 13 universities that have a gender pay gap within the WGEA +/-5% target range, while non-members dominate the bottom of the table.

Rank	Members - lowest gender pay gap	Rank	Non-Members - highest gender pay gap
2	University of Sydney 1.7%	41	Avondale University 24.6%
3	University of Queensland 1.8%	40	University of Notre Dame 18.0%
4	University of New South Wales 2.4%	38	University of New England 11.7%**
5	University of Canberra 3.1%	37	Central Queensland University 13.3%

* Torrens University Australia Limited was ranked number 1, however it has few STEMM faculties

** University of New England became a SAGE member in 2026

***28 universities are SAGE member organisations.

MEDICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTES

Average median total remuneration Gender Pay Gap	SAGE Members	Non-Members	Difference
2024–25	4.5%	8.5%	-4.0 pp
2023–24	6.4%	9.7%	-3.3 pp
Change year-on-year	-1.9 pp	-1.2 pp	Members improving faster

*Average median total remuneration gender pay gap for the MRI sector was 7.7% in 2024-2025

SAGE member medical research institutes have reduced their median total remuneration gender pay gap by nearly a third in a single year, outpacing non-members by a significant margin. The Burnet Institute reported a negative 2.4% gender pay gap, meaning women out-earn men.

Rank	Member – Lowest Gender Pay Gap	Rank	Non-Members – Highest Gender Pay Gap
3	Burnet Institute -2.4%	31	Centenary Institute of Cancer Medicine & Cell Biology 22.4%
5	The Kids Research Institute 2.1%	30	Linear Clinical Research 19.8%

*Six medical research institutes are SAGE members.

PUBLIC SECTOR SCIENCE RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

Average median total remuneration Gender Pay Gap	SAGE Members	Non-Members	Difference
Average median GPG 2024–25	10.0%	17.1%	-7.1 pp

Average median total remuneration Gender Pay Gap	SAGE Members	Non-Members	Difference
Average median GPG 2023–24	12.6%	15.1%	–2.5 pp
Change year-on-year	–2.6 pp	+2.0 pp	Members improving; non-members worsening

*Four of 12 public sector science research agencies are SAGE members.

** Average median total remuneration gender pay gap for the sector was 14.7% in 2024-2025

The most dramatic divergence is in public sector science research organisations. While member agencies cut their pay gap by more than 2.5 percentage points in a single year, non-member agencies saw their gap increase. The gap between the two groups now stands at over 7 percentage points, nearly triple what it was the previous year. The worst gender pay gap of any university and research organisation was the National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority, a non-member, with a median gender pay gap of 46.3%.

This is the first year that public sector science research organisations included their CEOs' remuneration in their gender pay gap reporting.

ACTIONS DELIVER RESULTS

WHAT MEMBERS DO DIFFERENTLY

One of the clearest differences between SAGE members and non-members is not just the outcome, it's the actions they take to achieve it. The data shows that members are far more likely to have done the hard analytical work needed to close their pay gap and are taking active steps to address the issue as they progress through the SAGE Athena Swan program journey.

Action Taken	SAGE Members	Non-Members	Member advantage
Conducted a gender pay gap audit	94.7%	71.7%	+23.0 pp
Taken action on audit findings	86.8%	52.2%	+34.7 pp
Identified root causes of pay gaps	71.1%	41.3%	+29.7 pp
Has a formal equal pay policy	92.1%	71.7%	+20.4 pp
Audit completed within last 12 months	73.7%	60.9%	+12.8 pp

Nearly 9 in 10 SAGE Member organisations have taken action on their gender pay gap audit findings, compared to just over half of non-members.

Identifying the cause of a pay gap is the essential first step. Without understanding why the gap exists, employers cannot fix it.

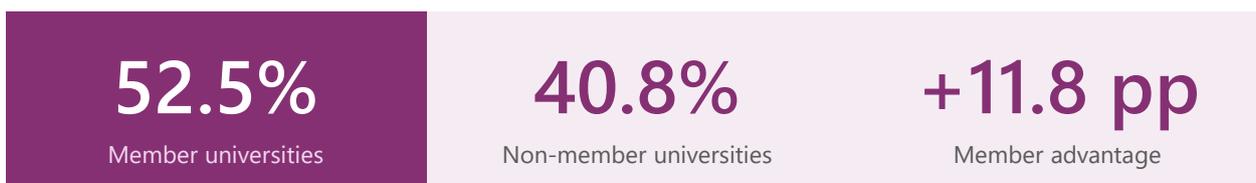
Women in Leadership: Progress and Gaps

Closing the gender pay gap requires more than equal pay policies. It requires women to hold positions of power. The report shows that while some sectors like universities are making progress, others like public sector science research agencies have a long way to go.

Women in Leadership by Sector (2024–2025)	SAGE Members	Non-Members	Difference
Universities	50.9%	48.8%	+2.1 pp
Medical Research Institutes	54.1%	55.6%	-1.5 pp
Public Sector Science Research Agencies	37.2%	37.1%	+0.1 pp
All sectors combined	50.0%	50.5%	-0.5 pp

When it comes to the boardroom, member universities have achieved gender parity, a remarkable result by any international standard. This represents an 11.8 percentage point advantage over non-member universities.

WOMEN ON UNIVERSITY GOVERNING BODIES (BOARDS)



However, medical research institutes and public sector science research agencies are behind.

Women on Governing Bodies by Sector (2024–2025)	SAGE Members	Non-Members	Difference
Universities	52.5%	40.8%	+11.8pp
Medical Research Institutes	40.0%	40.4%	-0.4 pp
Public Sector STEM Agencies	42.8%	43.9%	-1.1 pp
All sectors combined	49.5%	41.1%	+8.4 pp

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The SAGE program is working. Across every measure that matters: pay gaps, audits, actions, and board representation, SAGE member organisations outperform their non-member peers.

A two-speed gap. The difference in gender pay gap outcomes between members and non-members has more than tripled since 2022–2023 in the university sector from 1 pp to 3.1 pp, as members improve and non-members stagnate or go backwards.

Action drives outcomes. Almost 9 in 10 member organisations have taken tangible action on their gender pay gap findings. The data clearly shows that organisations which do the analytical work and take action achieve better outcomes.

The pay gap is a choice. Pay gaps varied from within target range to 46% in favour of men. Those with the lowest pay gaps have taken action to address the systemic problems. Large pay gaps are not inevitable, but reflect institutional choices about pay structures, promotion, workforce composition and desire to take meaningful action.

Boards are leading the way. At SAGE member universities, women now make up more than half of all governing body members, an 11.8 percentage point advantage over non-members.

WHAT IS SAGE?

SAGE delivers Australia's leading workplace programs driving progress in gender equity, diversity and inclusion in universities, TAFEs, medical research institutes and public sector research agencies. SAGE's evidence-based and impact-focused frameworks are customised to each institution and measured against international benchmarks.

A not-for-profit, SAGE was founded by Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering in 2014 and is funded by member organisations with support from the Australian Government.

WHAT IS THE GENDER PAY GAP?

The gender pay gap measures the difference between what men and women earn on average across an organisation. WGEA requires all employers with 100 or more staff to report their gender pay gap data annually. The gender pay gap is primarily driven by women's disproportionate share of unpaid caring work, industrial segregation (women in lower-paid sectors), lack of women in senior leadership, workplace culture and gender bias. It can be addressed by taking active steps to deliver systemic change across the organisation.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF THE DATA?

The WGEA data focuses on gender only, is binary and doesn't look at broader diversity measures.

This report is an analysis of the university, medical research and public sector science research agency data in the 2024–25 WGEA's Employer Gender Pay Gaps Report. All figures are median total remuneration gender pay gaps unless otherwise stated. SAGE members are organisations enrolled in the Athena Swan program delivered by SAGE.

Data source: WGEA's Employer Data Explorer 2024–2025, March 2026. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/Data-Explorer/Employer>