

SAGE Cygnet Award Application

Cygnet 3: Women in Leadership



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AUSTRALIA

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SAGE CYGNET AWARD APPLICATION FORM



SAGE

SCIENCE IN AUSTRALIA
GENDER EQUITY

SAGE Cygnet Award Application

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The University of Western Australia: SAGE CYGNET

Scope (Institution-wide barrier or Sub-group specific barrier)	Current Cygnet ✓	Barrier
[Mandatory] Sub-group barrier	Cyg1	Acting on gender imbalance in Engineering
[Mandatory] Institution-wide barrier	Cyg 2	Visibility of Women (submitted)
Institution-wide barrier	✓	Women in leadership
Institution-wide barrier		Academic promotions (in progress)
Institution-wide barrier		Changing how we define academic success (in progress)

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Glossary of Acronyms

ASB	Athena Swan Bronze
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
DVCR	Deputy Vice- Chancellor (Research)
PVC	Pro Vice-Chancellor
SDVC	Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor
STEMM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine
UWA	University of Western Australia

Data Statement

UWA affirms that gender extends beyond binary categories. Historically, our data collection systems did not reflect this, but we are gradually improving systems in partnership with UWA's LGBTIQA+ Working Group. Gaps remain in our intersectional data collection, an area for further action.

Key barrier

Through the Athena Swan Bronze (ASB) process, the University of Western Australia (UWA) identified barriers to women's career advancement. A 2017 data analysis highlighted underrepresentation of women in leadership, particularly at executive level, and on key decision-making bodies. This application outlines the factors contributing to this imbalance, and the impact of initiatives implemented between 2018 and 2025 to increase women in leadership.

Sub-barriers:

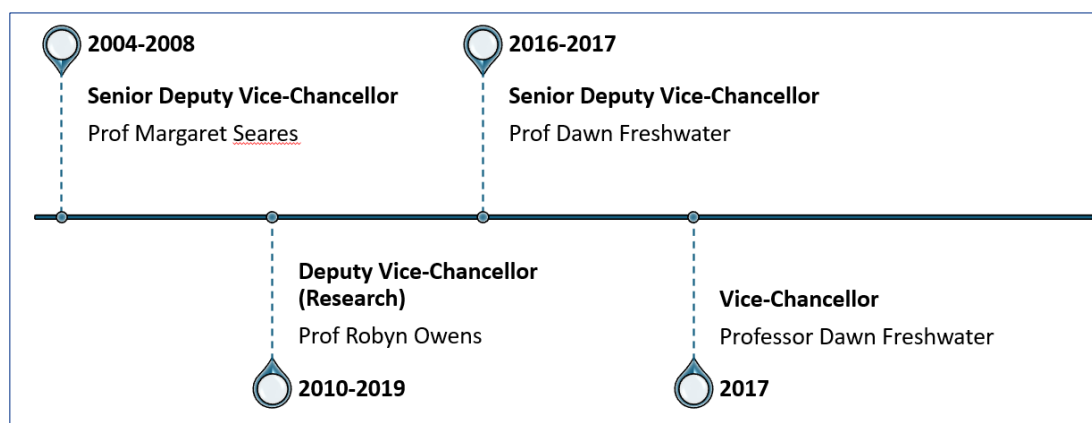
- 1.1 Lack of women in leadership
- 1.2 Low number of women receiving ARC grants
- 1.3 Lack of gender balance on decision-making bodies
- 1.4 Need for family-friendly workplace

Evidence of barrier

1.1 Lack of women in leadership

UWA had historically had few women at the centre of power. The 2017 ASB process highlighted that few women had been on the Executive,¹ (Figure 1).

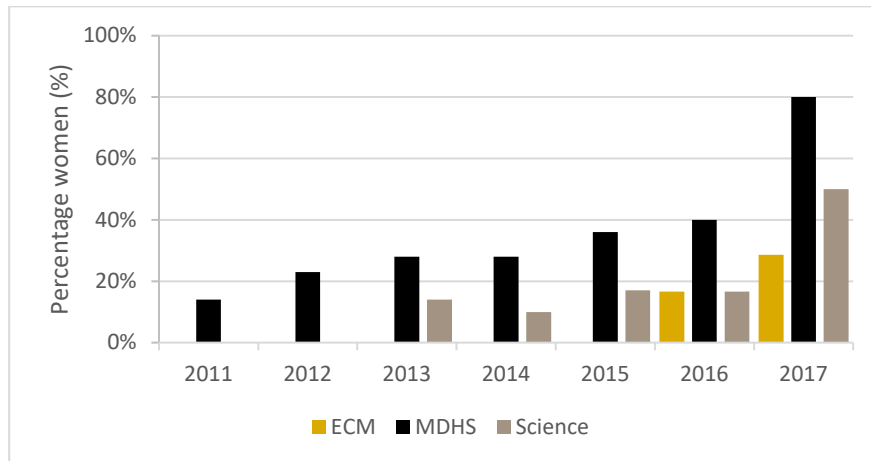
Figure 1: Timeline on Executive 2004-2017



In 2011, the percentage of women leaders in STEMM disciplines was exceptionally low (Figure 2). Between 2011-2017, this improved slightly - particularly in Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) – but gender balance had not been achieved (Figure 2).

¹ The first woman Vice-Chancellor was Professor Fay Gale (1990-1997). Since 2017, UWA has had a third woman Vice-Chancellor (Professor Jane Den Hollander), who was an interim Vice-Chancellor between March – July 2020. Since 2017, UWA has had a second woman Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) (Professor Anna Nowak 2022-present).

Figure 2: Percentage Women Heads of Schools / Centre Directors, STEMM (2011 – 2017)

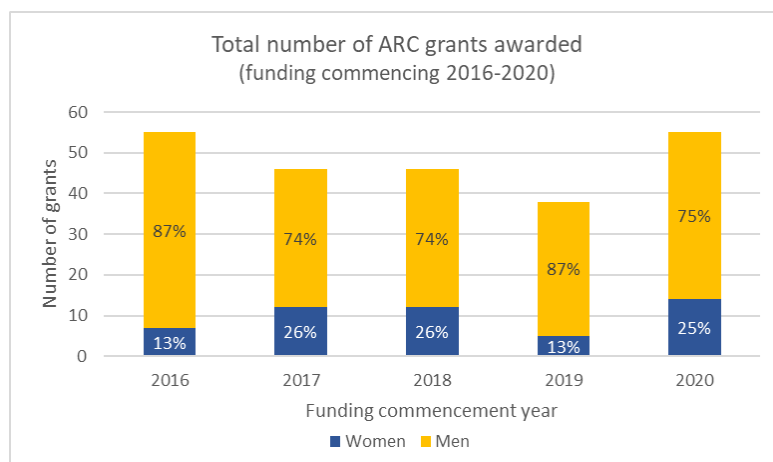


Women's leadership and service roles were not consistently recognised or rewarded. Women reported being overrepresented on lower-level committees and in service roles, but under-represented in key decision-making bodies (see 1.3).

1.2 Low number of women receiving ARC grants

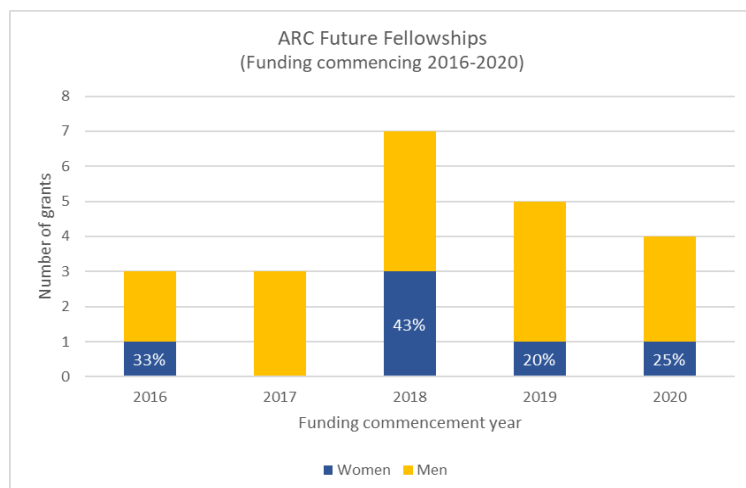
Women researchers were underrepresented as Chief Investigators in ARC grants awarded (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of Chief Investigators - ARC Grants by Gender (2016-2020)



No Laureate Fellowships were awarded to UWA women from 2017-2022 (three were awarded to men), and the proportion of women awarded Future Fellowships fluctuated but was generally low (Figure 4).

Figure 4: ARC Future Fellowships by Gender (2016-2020)



UWA men were awarded on average 4.8% more funding than women in Future Fellowships (2016-2020).

1.3 Lack of gender balance on decision-making bodies

Women were underrepresented in key university decision-making bodies. Senate experienced a decline in women members between 2016-2019 (Figure 5), as did Academic Council (Figure 6). Academic Board hovered around one-third women (Figure 7).

Figure 5: Senate Members by Gender 2016-2019

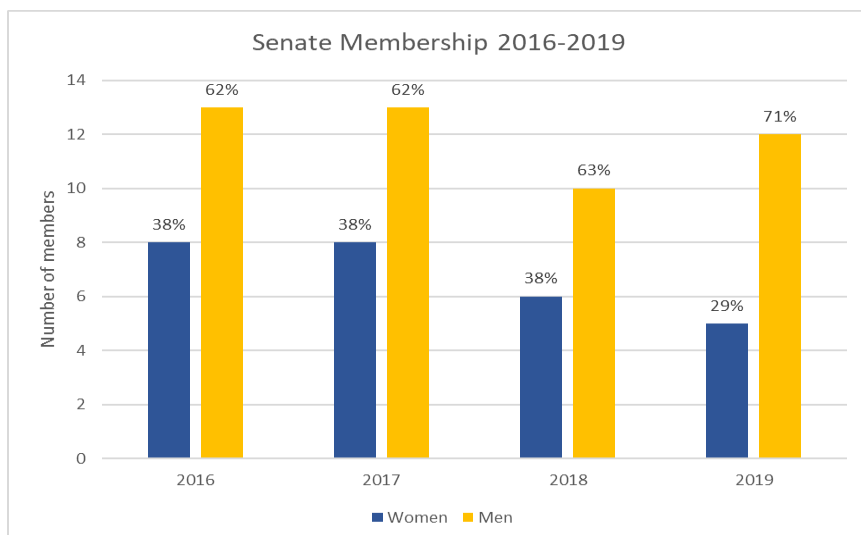


Figure 6: Academic Council Members by Gender 2016-2019

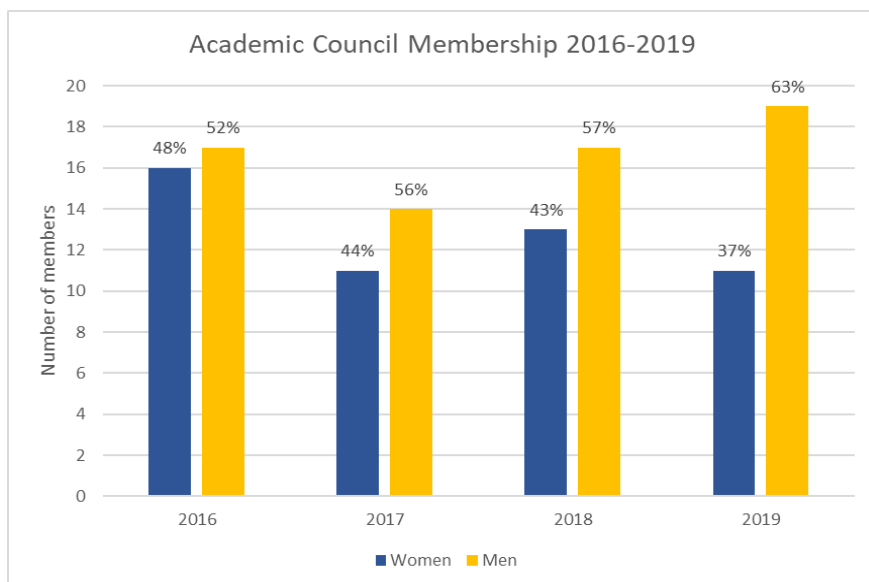
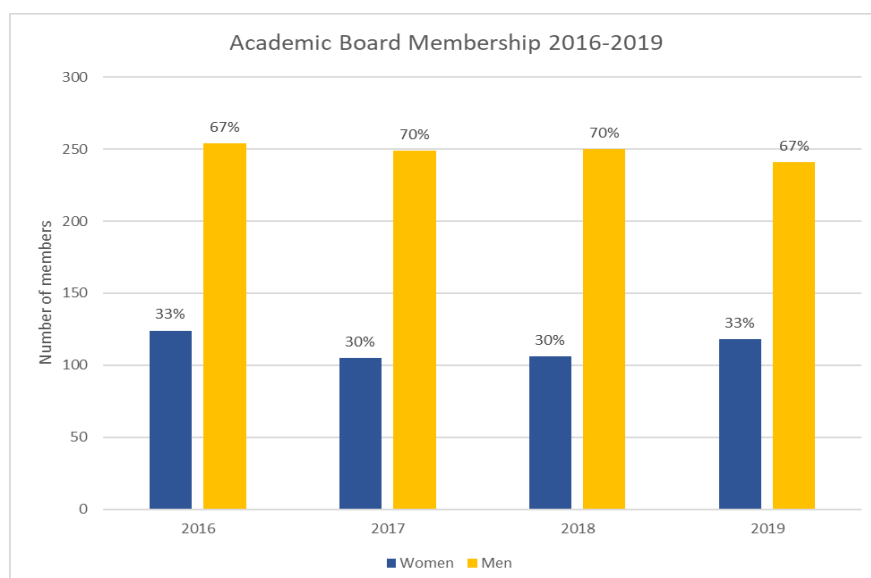


Figure 7: Academic Board Members by Gender 2016-2019



1.4 Need for family-friendly workplace

Women reported that meeting schedules limited their participation in leadership roles. Meeting times varied - Academic Board and Academic Council meetings were held at 2pm for two hours, a challenge for those collecting school children. Evening committee social events further limited networking for those with caring responsibilities.

Progress (Actions and outputs)

UWA has made concerted efforts to address the barriers identified by implementing actions across the four areas.² An area for future action is intersectional data collection and initiatives.

1.1: Increasing women in leadership

Action 1: Reform performance appraisal

UWA carried out internal and external reviews and implemented reforms to its performance management system from 2019-present (Table 1).

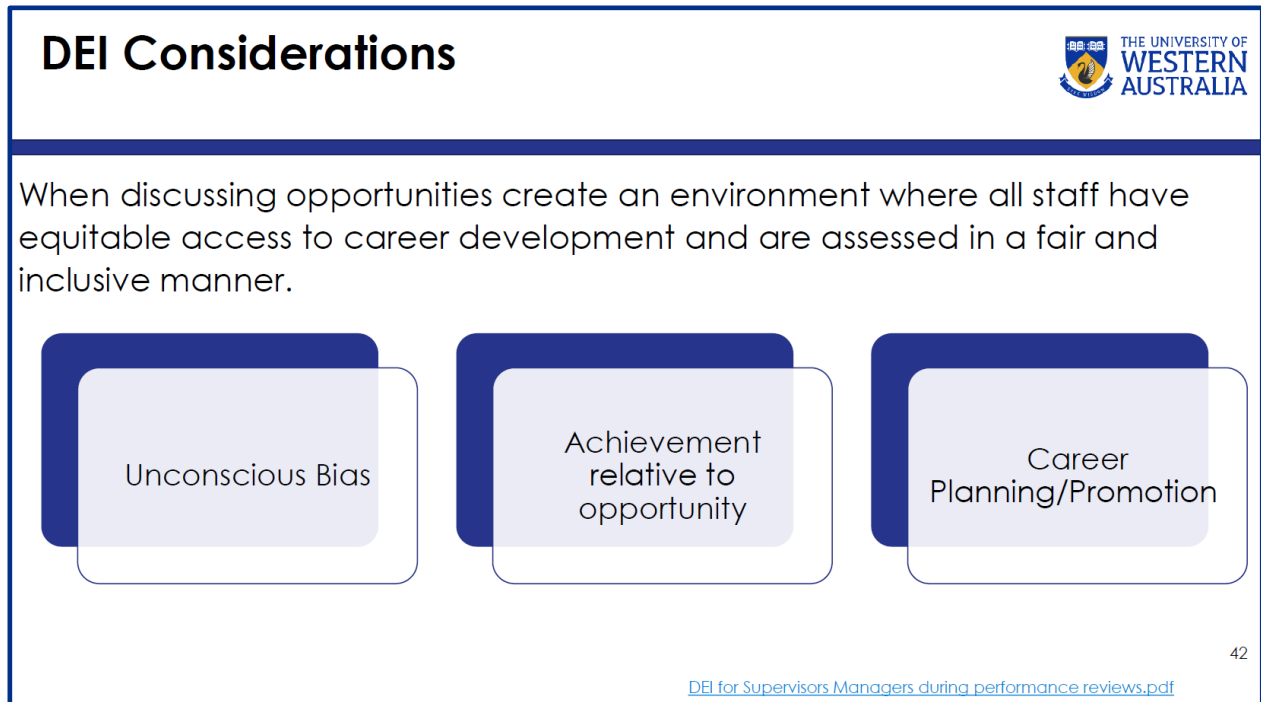
Table 1: Reviews of Performance Appraisal

Year	Review
2019	Internal review
2020	Removal of outdated leadership competencies
2021-23	External audit (Ernst & Young)
2023	Enhancements, including more detailed behavioural descriptors reflecting a broader range of types of contributions
2024	Strengthened manager training on bias and applying Achievement Relative to Opportunity policy (Figure 8).
2025	<i>My Progress App</i> introduced.

² There has also been work on gender equity in academic promotions that supported women to reach leadership positions (outlined in a separate cygnet).

The *MyProgress App* is a tool to improve performance appraisals and goal setting. It is accompanied by a guide and manager training, and embeds achievement relative to opportunity (ARTO). Embedding ARTO is important in assessing performance, particularly women's performance, and in supporting women to progress to leadership positions.

Figure 8: Training for Managers 2024 & 2025 – example PowerPoint



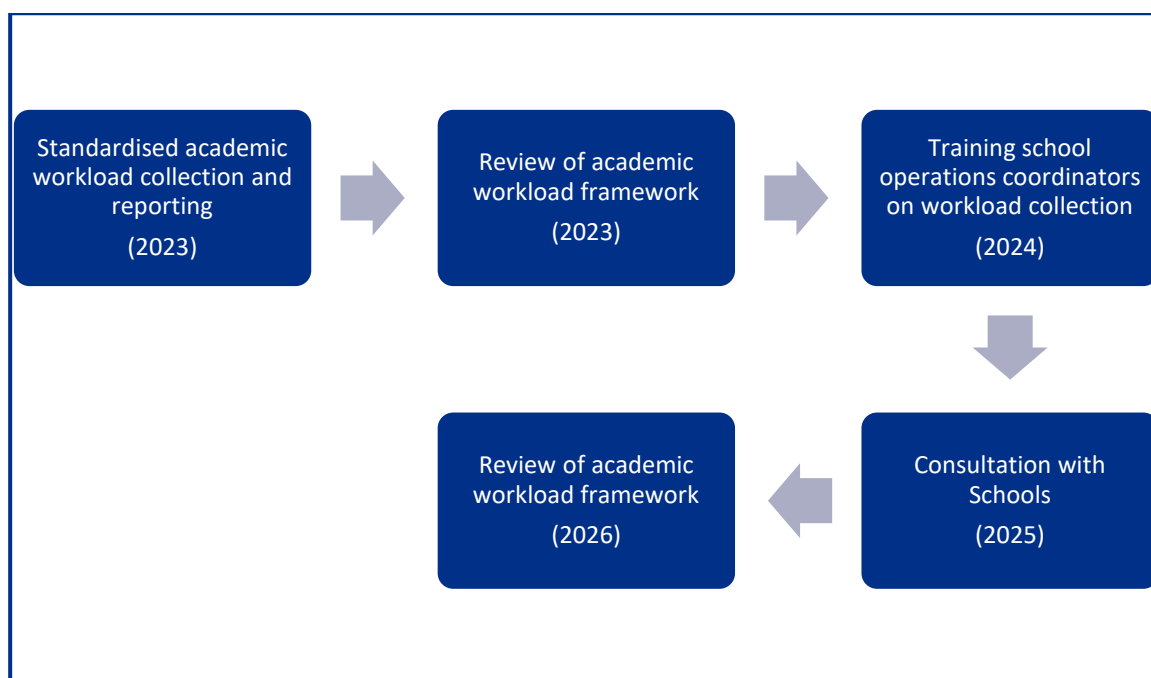
Action 2: Develop leadership capacity

New leadership programs piloted in 2025 are being rolled out in 2026. One component of the leadership training is developing inclusive leadership and psychologically safe and diverse teams. Recognising the career barriers faced by women, there are more women than men participants, giving women opportunities to develop leadership skills and networks.

Action 3: Review workload models

UWA has refined the Academic Workload Framework from 2023–2026 (Figure 9) to address consistency and transparency of workload models. From 2026, the PVC Academic Advancement & Diversity chairs the Academic Workload Advisory Committee, strengthening DEI considerations.

Figure 9: Academic Workload Framework Improvements



At each stage, Heads of Schools were engaged and receive annual feedback on School Workload Models; this, and the updated Framework, support greater transparency and equity in workloads (Table 2).

Table 2: Changes to Academic Workload Framework

Area	Changes
Governance	Introduced consultation processes, mandatory response periods. Effective Academic Workload Advisory Committee providing advice on the Framework and on reviews of School Workload Models. SDVC annually reviews Schools' workload data.
Equity	References Fair Work Act s65. ³ Safeguards staff returning from leave / with equity needs.
Transparency	School Workload Models on SharePoint. Staff access to calculations.
Accuracy	Mechanisms for tracking projected versus actual workload. Clearer rules governing interaction between service minimums and assigned roles.
Recognition and Reward	Workload allocations aligned with sabbatical and promotion frameworks. Clarified banding rules and expectations.
Service	School Workload Models define academic citizenship. Expanded Assigned Roles capture broader responsibilities, increasing visibility and relevance (e.g. promotions/sabbaticals).

The final item in Table 2 – Service, was significant as the workload framework now better articulates the importance of service roles – more commonly held by women. It also ensures that time needed for these roles is allocated, as well as more recently for some central roles, to have back-fill arrangements. Properly recognising, valuing and rewarding service meant that women did not have to do service roles as 'extra' tasks, and did not need to individually negotiate recognition for them. It also contributed to greater recognition of service roles as leadership roles.

³³ Fair Work Act 2009 – Section 65 flexible working arrangements including gender and equity factors.

1.2: Low number of women receiving ARC grants

Action 4: Increase Women in ARC College of Experts

In response to low nomination rates of women (27%, 2019-2024) to the College of Experts, UWA introduced strategies from 2023 to strengthen women's participation. The Office of Research identified high-potential women academics, and the DVCR personally encouraged nominations. A webinar was hosted to demystify the nomination process. These actions shifted nominations from self-selection to institutional sponsorship.

Action 5: Increase ARC grant success for women

UWA embedded gender monitoring and support in research funding pipelines. From 2021, grant applications and outcomes by gender were tracked. From 2022, the Pre-Award team provided targeted support to high-potential women, particularly for fellowship schemes. The Library provided support for women's research profiles, and two full-time staff were added in 2023 for early engagement, metrics support, and application drafting.

1.3: Lack of gender balance on decision-making bodies

Action 6: Gender balance policy

UWA introduced a 40:40:20 gender balance policy for committees in 2020; and, as an example, all Academic Board standing and sub-committees' constitutions provide for co-option for gender balance. This gender balance is monitored by the Chairs and Executive Officers of each committee. The same principle is replicated at School level, which is more complex to attain where the School has a lack of gender balance (e.g. STEMM disciplines) and may not be the preferred option as it may disproportionately load a small number of women staff with multiple committee roles.

1.4: Need for family-friendly workplace

Action 7: Policies and practices

UWA implemented a Family-Friendly Meeting Policy in 2020, requiring scheduling within core hours to improve accessibility for staff with caring responsibilities. Academic Board and Academic Council moved their 2-hour meetings from 2pm to 10am (2021) and adopted hybrid meetings (2022). The annual dinner event moved to lunchtime, facilitating participation by those with caring responsibilities.

New parking for carers was introduced in 2025, allowing priority access after 9am (Figure 10). Parking is limited on and around campus and those with school drop-off and other caring responsibilities often missed out on parking spots to staff who came on campus earlier. This placed additional pressure on staff with caring responsibilities, disproportionately women, and impacted their ability to get to teaching venues or other commitments on time. Enabling them to access priority parking after 9am reduces stress, and facilitates their ability to meet commitments with more certainty – particularly important for those in / aiming for leadership positions with significant time commitments. In 2026, the location of the carpark has moved, and not all carers have had their application for priority parking approved. There remains a shortage of parking and increased cost of parking amid cost-of-living concerns.

Figure 10: Priority Parking Announcement



ANNOUNCEMENT

Expanded priority parking for primary caregivers: more access now available

Published 08/04/2025 · 1 min read

Earlier this year, we introduced priority access parking to Car Park 23 (southern end of campus) for staff balancing school drop-offs or caregiving duties.

Based on trial data, which shows that not all bays in Car Park 23 are being fully used, we're now **expanding access to more staff with caregiving responsibilities**.

How it works:

1. The designated bays will be available from **9am onwards each weekday**, providing a helpful buffer for staff starting later due to caregiving duties.
2. You will use the Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) system via EasyPark to manage your parking.

Want to learn more or check your eligibility? Visit the [Service Directory for full details](#).

Outcomes

1.1: Increasing Women in Leadership

More women senior leaders

UWA now has gender balance in senior leadership roles, the Executive has three women and three men (Figure 11), and over 50% of Heads of School are women (Figure 12). Unfortunately, we have not always had data collection to track this and to disaggregate by discipline, nor has an intersectional approach been taken – an area for improvement. In 2025, UWA appointed its first woman Chancellor, business professional and gender equity advocate, Dr Diane Smith-Gander AO.

Figure 11 Gender Balance: Executive 2026

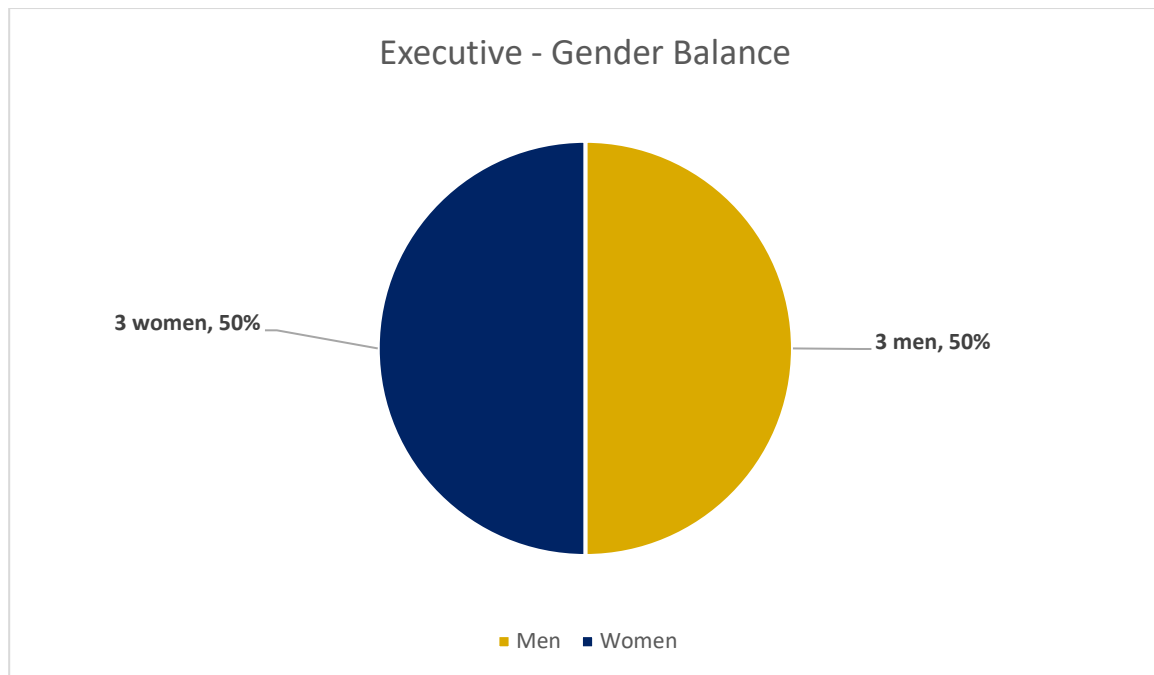
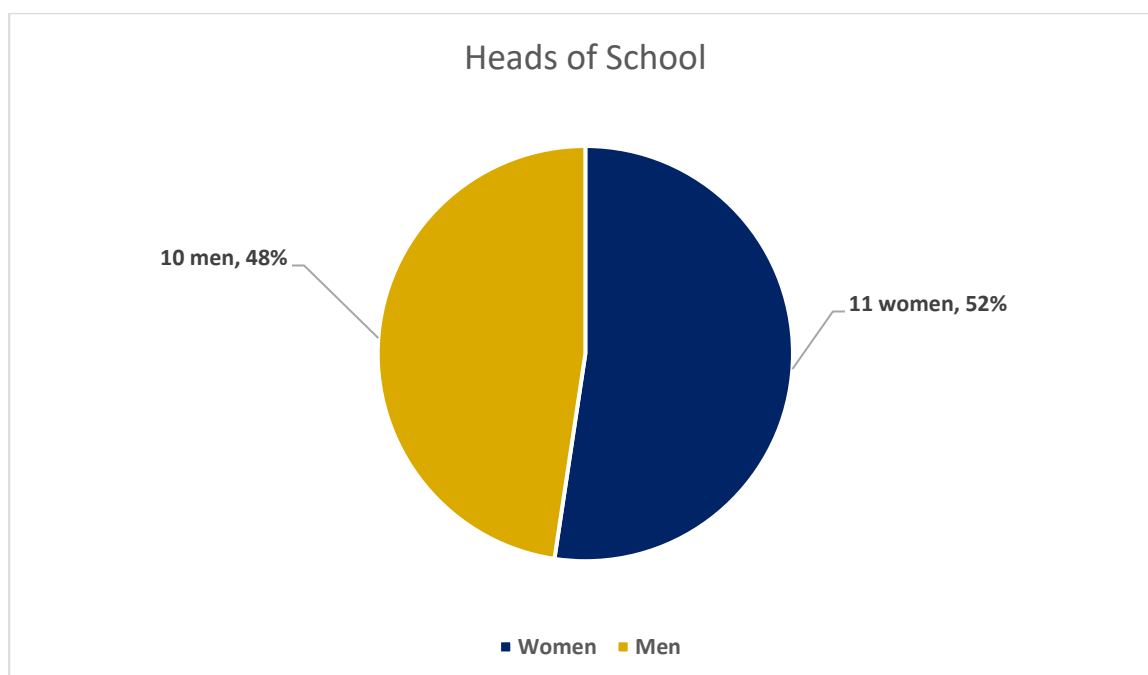


Figure 12 Gender Balance: Heads of School 2026



Recognition of leadership

Systemic changes recognising diverse leadership in performance review (and promotions - Cygnet 4) strengthened women’s positioning for leadership roles. Knowing that this work is recognised, women increasingly took up these roles.

Leadership training

UWA has introduced a suite of leadership programs since 2024 (Figure 13).

Figure 13 Leadership Programs

- i. **2024** Aurora Program - 10 academic women Levels A-C.
- ii. **2024-2026** *Elevate* for senior academic leaders - 20 women, 19 men.
- iii. **2025** *Lead*, two-day leadership workshop for academic and professional staff.
- iv. **2025** *Horizon*, nine-month executive and senior leaders program.

Elevate program evaluations note the opportunities for networking and engagement with senior leaders, including the Vice-Chancellor.

Women are over-represented in participants, addressing the career barriers experienced by women and historic imbalance (Table 3).

Table 3: Leadership Programmes (Lead & Horizon) Gender Balance

	2025 Pilot	2026 enrolments
Women	65% (26/40)	69% (83/120)
Men	35% (14/40)	31% (37/120)

Evaluations of each program inform ongoing improvement but as yet, we lack disaggregation of evaluations by gender; intersectional data; and DEI-specific evaluation questions – areas for development.

1.2: Low number of women receiving ARC grants

More women on the ARC College of Experts

UWA has increased representation of women on the College of Experts from 13% (2020) to 60% (2026) (Figure 14). Compared to men, a higher proportion of women *nominees* from UWA have been selected by the ARC.

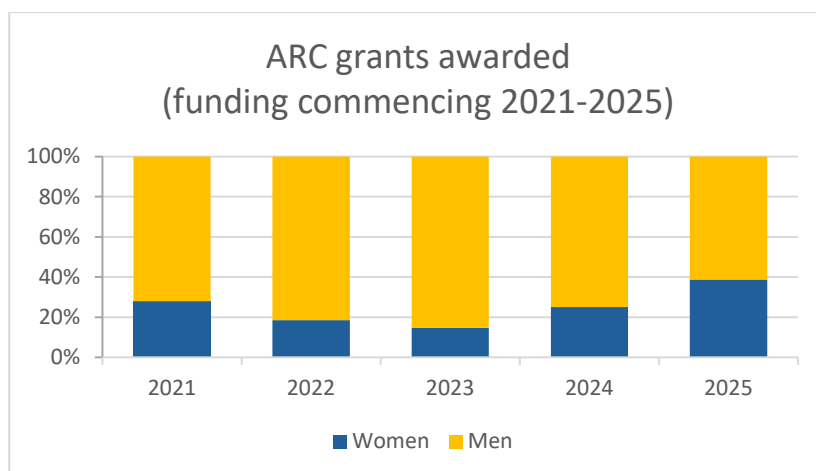
Figure 14 ARC College of Experts Members by Gender (2020-2026)



More women receiving ARC grants

Progress on ARC grant success for women has been gradual, with the highest proportion of women Chief Investigators in 2025 (39%) (Figure 15) as activities in 2022-2023 come to fruition.

Figure 15: Chief Investigators of ARC Grants Awarded - by Gender (2021-2025)



Progress has also been gradual in Fellowships. There were no successful applications for Future Fellowships by women in 2021-2022, but two women were successful in 2023 and 2025, and one in 2024 (Figure 16). Women are now awarded 9.1% more funding than men for Future Fellowships. Two women were awarded Laureates - one in 2023 and one in 2025 - up from zero in the ASB assessment period.

Figure 16: Future Fellowships by Gender (2021-2025)

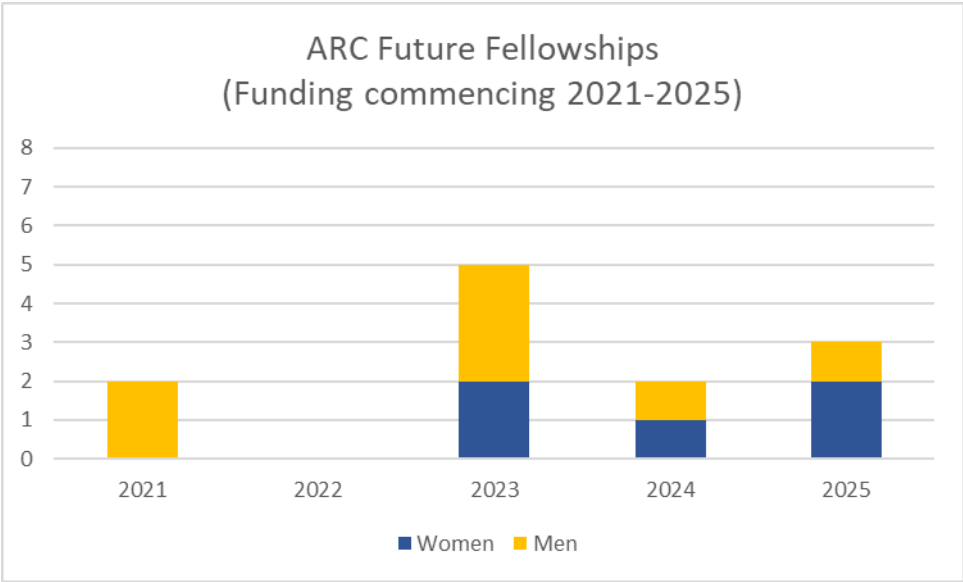


Figure 17 Gender Pay Gap

UWA Gender Pay Gap:
 8.9% in 2024-2025 compared with
 10.4% in 2023-2024

**Increase of women in the upper
pay quartile:**
 50% in 2024-2025 compared with
 47% in 2023-2024.

UWA’s improved gender pay gap (Figure 17) also indicates more women are in senior positions.¹

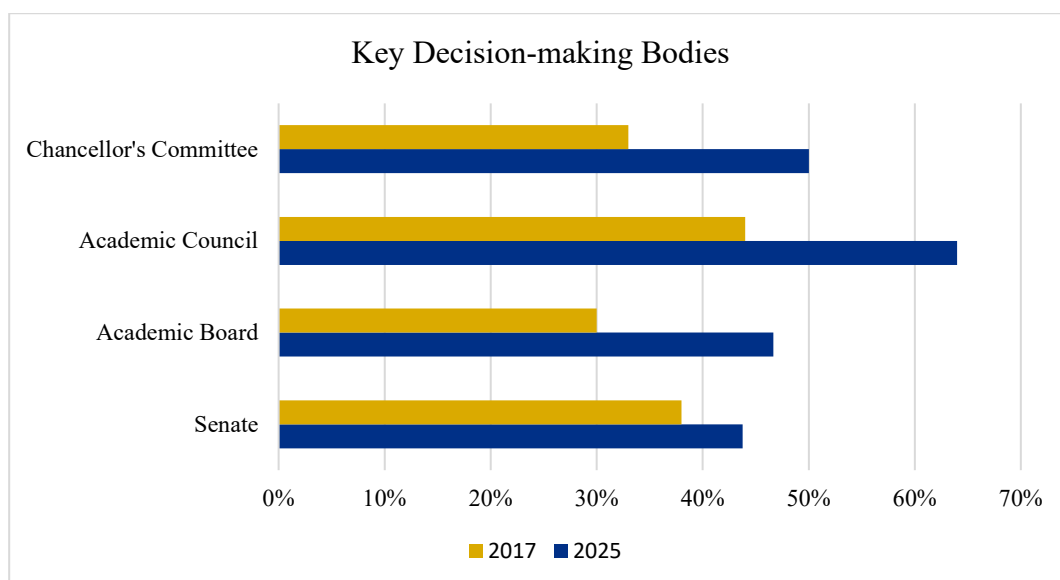
1.3: Lack of gender balance on decision-making bodies

UWA has achieved gender balance on decision-making bodies (Table 4). In 2025, membership averages 51% women - a significant improvement since 2017 (Figure 18).

Table 4: Membership of Decision-making Bodies (2025)

2025 membership	Men	Women	Total	Percentage women
Senate	9	7	16	44%
Academic Board	48	42	90	47%
Academic Council	9	16	25	64%
Chancellor's Committee	3	3	6	50%

Figure 18: Percentage Women on Decision-making Bodies



1.4: Need for family-friendly workplace

The 2025 annual Employee Engagement Survey indicated satisfaction with flexible working. There was 79% agreement with the statement ‘UWA provides me with flexible work opportunities’. However, this varied significantly - from 30% in some Schools, to 100% in others – an area for development.

The Priority Access Permit system introduced in 2025 has 34 dedicated parking bays. In 2025, 157 applications were received, and 157 permits were issued resulting in 1,842 parking sessions. 74% of applicants were women with caring responsibilities.

Impact

In December 2025, eight people were interviewed about the impact of initiatives (Table 5) and in March 2026, participants at a UWA International Women’s Day (‘IWD’) event received a post-event survey which also asked about awareness of Athena Swan and perceived impact of ASB initiatives. Data from a Career Barriers Survey (2023) and employee engagement survey (2025) also helped inform this analysis. Additional insights were sought from other relevant stakeholders (purposive sampling). Responses quoted below are de-identified so that participants could contribute openly.

Table 5 Profile of interviewees, 2025

Role / Level	DEI Characteristics (self-identified)	Number
Professional staff	Woman	2
Level E	Woman in STEMM	1
Level B	Non-binary person	1
Level D	Woman, CALD background	2
Level E	Woman, carer	1
Level C	Woman with a disability	1

Data from the interviews, surveys and other sources confirmed that progress had been made in creating an inclusive and family-friendly work environment where women's contributions were recognised in workload and performance review, and where women have been able to progress to, or be appointed to, senior leadership positions and hold membership in key decision-making bodies on parity with men. However, it was also clear that more needs to be done. An overarching point made by a few interviewees was the improvement on women in leadership but the lack of awareness of other forms of gender equity and broader diversity characteristics.

Women in Leadership

Many participants noted women's success, leadership and the increase in women role models. Some interviewees commented on the benefit of receiving support with grants, seeing other women achieve grant success and take on leadership roles, as well as the increased access to role models:⁴

I was very lucky to have a good number of women role models in my discipline, and that was really, really important for me... Having enough role models around showed me a diversity of leadership styles.
(Senior Academic, woman)

A respondent to the UWA IWD survey commented on the impact of ASB:

More women are in leadership roles, in meetings, enjoying research success and leading Schools. They are more visible at UWA than they used to be and lots of good role models around.

Performance Appraisal and Workload

Interview participants noted positive benefits from changes to performance appraisals, and valuing service roles and different forms of leadership:

Very soon after I arrived at UWA I was asked to take on service roles. That gave me a number of opportunities and I went on to become Deputy Head of School... Then I was elected to the National Council of my discipline and we went on internationalise across New Zealand and Southeast Asia. This national and international recognition was important when I was appointed Head of School. Looking back on it, my service roles at UWA gave me the public profile to lead my discipline globally, and then my global roles supported me as Head of School. It all works synergistically.
(Senior Academic, woman)

Others commented on the recognition of mentoring and leading others as important leadership qualities, appreciated changes to performance appraisal, the Academic Workload Framework, and the improved promotion process (see Cygnet 4) resonated strongly with many, for example:

Leadership in the old promotion system was something that took us outside our academic role. Promotion was all about what you had done in your research and your teaching. It wasn't about leadership or mentoring or developing capacity of others. Nowadays,

⁴ Lilian Hill, Celeste Wheat, 'The Influence of Mentorship and Role Models on University Women Leaders' Career Paths to University Presidency' (2017) 22(8) *The Qualitative Report* 2090.

*demonstrating leadership is so much more important, particularly at Level D and E. You have to demonstrate that you are being proactive in supporting and leading change around you. **Women used to do so much of this heavy lifting without it being recognised. But now it has definitely changed.***
(Woman interviewee, Senior Academic)

In terms of academic workload, although some progress has been made, interviewees raised concerns over administrative creep, and a lack of proper consultation on workload models within Schools (even though it is a requirement in the Framework). One commented:

Things have got worse but that could be the whole sector.
(Senior Academic, woman) Family Friendly Workplace

Changes that made the university a more family-friendly workplace were valued, including flexible working and carer parking which 'relieves stress' (Senior Academic, woman, carer). As a recent initiative, the impact of this requires ongoing monitoring. There remains a shortage of parking and increased cost of parking amid cost-of-living concerns.

Gender Balance on Decision-making Bodies

Gender balance on decision-making bodies was viewed positively but with ongoing work needed on culture, and on gender balance across disciplines (not examined in this cygnet). One senior leader (man) noted women's increased participation in decision-making enhanced navigation of complex issues, and that discussions are characterised by collaborative problem-solving and constructive management of difficult conversations. Another reflected:

My impression of the impact of women in decision-making bodies at UWA is that progress has been uneven... The last five years have seen a significant change. There has been less publicity about UWA's efforts to promote gender equality but, more importantly, more women have been appointed to senior positions in administration such that there is now close to even representation in entities such as the Senate and Academic Board. I think this is a great development...[but] There continue to systematic differences in the representation of women across the academic disciplines, both at the level of staff and students.
(Senior leader, man, Academic Governance)

A senior academic woman who has held positions on many key decision-making bodies at UWA was specifically contacted for input on this aspect of the cygnet. She reported progress but also the need for ongoing work on cultural change:

Increased representation of women on Senate, Academic Board and related forums at UWA has certainly strengthened the quality of discussion and scrutiny around major decisions, and provided pathways to leadership for competent and experienced women. That said, representation alone doesn't always solve structural dynamics and women who reach these roles on merit still have to navigate institutional cultures shaped by longstanding masculine norms. Overt bias is uncommon, but more subtle forms of differential reception and authority can persist and can impede the translation of female representation into genuine influence and permanent cultural change.
(Senior academic, woman)

Conclusion

Our analysis of qualitative and quantitative data on impact reveal successes and some areas for improvement. Although some of the successes described here could appear individual rather than collective, higher education institutions with women in senior leadership roles have better representation of women throughout the organisation, and women in those organisations are also paid higher salaries than in comparable organisations with less senior women in leadership.⁵ Areas for improvement have been addressed in the following section.

⁵ Melissa Fuesting, Jacqueline Bichsel, and Anthony Schmidt, *Women in the Leadership Pipeline in Higher Education Have Better Representation and Pay in Institutions With Female Presidents and Provosts* (Report, College & University Professional Association for Human Resources, January 2022).

Further Actions

Despite the increase in women in leadership already achieved, several areas for improvement were identified that if addressed would improve women in leadership and gender equity more broadly at UWA. Insights and data came from the Career Barriers survey (2023), Staff Engagement Survey (2025), eight key informant interviews (December 2025) and feedback (purposive sampling). Progress may have been made since the 2023 survey, but findings are triangulated with more recent data sources (staff engagement survey and interviews).

No.	Rationale/ Evidence	Actions & Outputs	Timeframe (start & end)	Person/Group responsible for implementing action	Senior Leader accountable for action delivery	Desired Outcomes/ Targets/Success Indicators
1	There are more women in leadership at UWA but diversity in leadership beyond gender is perceived to be limited e.g. Indigenous, trans/gender diverse, CaLD, religious diversity, LGBTIQ+, disability.	1.1 Improve data collection to ascertain problem (see 2 below). 1.2 Promote gender diversity beyond binary male/ female. 1.3 Track progress on achieving greater diversity in leadership, beyond gender.	2026-2028	Chief People & Culture Officer	Chief People & Culture Officer; PVC Academic Advancement & Diversity	Profile of diversity of senior leaders available. Action plan to support greater diversity in senior leaders developed.
2	UWA's data collection is limited, meaning that we do not have an accurate profile of staff demographics. Gender data is collected but gender other than female / male is limited and there is limited intersectional data (e.g. Indigenous, CaLD, religion, disability, LGBTIQ+). There is also work to do to ensure data and privacy protocols are robust and the environment is one where staff feel comfortable sharing personal information and understand how it will be used, and by whom.	Enhance data capture and presentation	2026-2028	Deputy Vice Chancellor Operations	Chief People & Culture Officer; Chief Information Officer; PVC Academic Advancement & Diversity	Improved protocols, more uptake of data collection in HR systems, better profile of staff demographics.

No.	Rationale/ Evidence	Actions & Outputs	Timeframe (start & end)	Person/Group responsible for implementing action	Senior Leader accountable for action delivery	Desired Outcomes/ Targets/Success Indicators
3	Differences in numbers of women in leadership and senior women continues to vary by discipline and School / business area specific gender equity plans are required.	Local gender equity plans.	2026-2027	Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor, People & Culture	Chief People & Culture Officer	Gender action plans in place with clear targets and actions.
4	Data collection to track and monitor Athena Swan initiatives can be strengthened.	Establish data collection guidance for each action area	2026 & ongoing	Project Manager, Academic Advancement & Diversity	PVC Academic Advancement & Diversity	Enhanced data and evaluation of initiatives – increased impact.
5	Further analyse data on flexible working and build flexible working considerations into local gender equity plans (no. 3 above). Agreement with statement ‘UWA provides me with flexible work opportunities’ varied significantly across Schools / business areas.	Enhanced understanding of flexible working practices, included in local gender equity plans.	2026-2027	People & Culture; PVC Academic Advancement & Diversity	Chief People & Culture Officer; PVC Academic Advancement & Diversity	More consistent staff satisfaction with flexible working conditions.
6	Mixed views on progress suggest even key informants are not fully aware of activities and improvements, or that barriers for increasing visibility of women are being addressed only for some women.	Disseminate information and updates re. Athena Swan action plan, including achievements and gaps.	2026-2029	PVC Academic Advancement & Diversity	PVC Academic Advancement & Diversity	Organisational awareness of Athena Swan increased, accessing SAGE supports and communities of practice increased, progress on accreditation.