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# Why aren't there more women running higher education?

**WOMEN IN THE DRIVING SEAT** In general, patriarchy isn't an explicit ongoing effort by men to dominate women; it's a long-standing system that we are born into, accept and participate in, mostly unconsciously.

**F** For more than 30 years, since 1985, more women have graduated from Australian universities than men.

For the past three years the difference has been more than 20,000.

So, even after allowing for women to have career breaks to manage family issues, wouldn't it be reasonable to expect universities to have at least similar numbers of men and women in the top management ranks?

Table 1 shows the relevant numbers at the end of 2016 from Universities Australia's website.

Apart from the DVC (Academic) role, men far outnumber women in these senior positions.

Why aren't there more women in senior roles in higher education (HE)?

Possible reasons are the following.

- 1 Women aren't as interested in senior roles as men.
- 2 Women don't perform well in senior roles compared with men.
- 3 There aren't enough women available for these roles.
- 4 Women don't apply for these roles as much as men do – some take career breaks for family reasons and some underestimate their ability to do the job.
- 5 Some of the men in charge favour men and discriminate against women. (There is also evidence that some senior women discriminate against other women.)

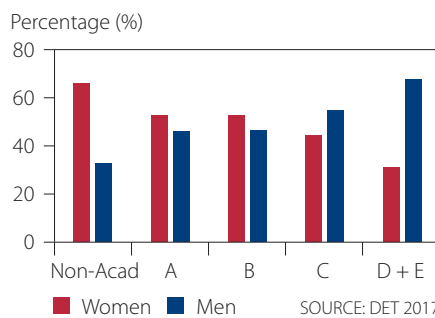
Much research has been carried out on the first two reasons, and there is no evidence that they are true in general.

The third reason is believed by many

**Table 1 Australian universities senior management gender analysis 2016.**

Position	Women (%)
Chancellor	15
Vice Chancellor	28
Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic)	54
Deputy Vice Chancellor (Corporate)	15
Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)	37
Deputy Vice Chancellor (International)	33

**Figure 1 Gender analysis of higher education staff (full time and fractional full time) roles in 2016.**



people to be a factor, but given the excess (20,000 over the past three years) of female graduates over male graduates in the past 30 years, this is also not true in general.

Because of their caring responsibilities for children and wider family members, some women may not be as mobile as men to take up new positions away from their home base. However, there is more data available.

Figure 1 shows percentages by gender of non-academic and academic staff in Australia. Australian Department of Education and Training statistics show that in Australia's HE institutions there are more than four times

the number of women at academic levels A, B and C (19,638) than at D and E (4813), so there is no shortage of available talent, given that women do perform as well as men in senior roles. It is therefore hard to accept that the third reason above has validity. Perhaps for regional institutions it is more relevant.

The fourth possible reason (that women don't apply for senior roles as much as men do, because some take career breaks for family reasons) does have validity, as does the contributing factor that some women underestimate their ability to do a more senior job.

There is considerable research showing that men tend to overestimate their abilities and performance, while women underestimate theirs (even though their performances do not differ in quality). This leads to men typically applying for a job when they have perhaps 50 to 70 per cent of the required skills, whereas women need about 90 to 110 per cent. (These are findings about women in general and they do not apply to any particular individual.)

So the question now is: does this fourth reason alone explain the low number of women in senior academic positions? The gap between the numbers of men and women in these roles is so large that this fourth reason alone is insufficient to explain it.

Therefore the inevitable conclusion is that the fifth reason – that men discriminate against women – is the major cause of this large discrepancy in numbers.

Men favouring men is the major characteristic of a patriarchal system, so let's look at the characteristics of such systems. They typically:

- hold traditional male qualities as central (for example, power, control, rationality and extreme competitiveness) while other qualities are subordinate (for example, emotional expressiveness, compassion, empathy and ability to nurture members);
- have gendered roles (that is, men lead and women support – and get paid or rewarded less);
- demand that men generally occupy the most important and visible roles (for example, senior executives, politicians, public leaders). Women who do hold these positions are expected to support and subscribe to male norms; and
- maintain traditional patriarchal social structures through a high level of control by male leaders. Control is sometimes assisted by generating fear.

In governments, religions, professions, business, communities, education and sport, patriarchy is the status quo. In general, patriarchy is not an explicit ongoing effort by men to dominate women. It is a long-standing system that we are born into, accept and participate in, mostly unconsciously.

So Australian HE institutions are patriarchal systems. What can be done to remedy this situation, given that there are so many talented women suitable for senior positions?

One important recent initiative is the introduction of the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) Pilot Program to Australia. SAGE is run by a partnership between ATSE and the Australian Academy of Science, adapting the UK Athena SWAN framework to suit Australia's conditions and equality challenges, and is supported by funding from the Australian Government.

But HE institutions need to tackle their lack of women in senior positions not just to be accredited in the SAGE program but, more importantly, to improve their organisational culture and effectiveness.

To do this, HE senior management needs to address two major issues:

- a lack of understanding in senior management of relevant male/female differences; and
- cognitive bias (both conscious and unconscious) in favour of men and against women.

There are some clearly established male/female personality and behavioural differences, and self-estimation of ability



Otago University – New Zealand's oldest – is led by VC Professor Harlene Hayne.

and performance (mentioned above) is one. Another is lower self-confidence of women in general. These two male/female differences alone cause women to be disadvantaged in typical HE recruitment and promotion processes, and steps need to be taken by senior management to allow for these differences.

How cognitive bias disadvantages female applicants in recruitment and promotion processes was described in *Focus* 194 (February 2016, page 5). As an example, in-group bias causes us to favour people of our own skin colour, ethnicity, gender, age, and so on – and people with similar interests or experiences to ourselves.

On the other hand, out-group bias causes us to be uncomfortable with, and act to avoid and disadvantage, people who are not like us. In the extreme, we fear people who are not like us, which is xenophobia.

In-group/out-group bias is strong in all of us because it's hard-wired in our brains from evolution. So in general, men favour men both unconsciously and consciously, and hence patriarchal organisations continue to thrive, as they have for millennia.

To get more women into senior academic positions, HE institutions should:

- ensure that the advertised role is described in a gender-neutral way;
- issue gender-neutral and ethnicity-neutral recruitment and promotion policies and procedures, and ensure they are followed;
- organise discussions on 'merit' (a subjective concept very susceptible to bias);
- organise removal of identity data for shortlisting candidates, if possible;
- proactively identify and encourage suitable women to apply for positions and promotions; and
- provide coaching on how to write an appropriate CV and application.

Recruitment and promotion panel members should:

- set up clear, non-gendered judging criteria;
- take into account male/female differences – for example, awareness of gender stereotypes, self-estimation differences between men and women, self-confidence being a substitute for competence, and a tendency to assess men on potential and women on past performance;
- understand the major biases relevant to recruitment and promotion decisions, the causes of bias and its mitigation; and
- discuss their own and other members' biases before and after making decisions about people, in a transparent process.

The Australian Government's National Innovation and Science Agenda notes that 75 per cent of all jobs in Australia's fastest growing industries require STEM skilled workers. In the STEM sector, the number of senior female academics is relatively far lower than across HE institutions generally, which means the lack of senior female academics in STEM needs to be addressed even more urgently.

ATSE is playing its part by running SAGE with the Academy of Science, by following a strict gender equity policy which demands, inter alia, that ATSE works only with institutions which have their own gender policy and that ATSE maintains a minimum target of 33 per cent of new Fellows being women. ☺

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