



## Vigilance against bias



Realising greater diversity in organisations requires better training and more understanding – but it also means recognising some gatekeepers are overtly prejudiced and removing them.

**"Men favour men."**  
It's a simple-sounding but complex concept that gender consultant Dr Mark Toner explored at *Campus Review's* Higher Equity Summit.

Toner is chair of the Gender Equity Working Group of the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering, and a

consultant at Gender Matters, but he clarified that he was speaking on his own behalf at the event.

Toner spoke at length on in-group and out-group bias and the impact those issues can have on women working in higher education. He explained that in-group bias is the notion that people favour those similar to them.

This includes people of the same skin colour, gender, age or background. People may feel uncomfortable with others who are different to them and may even seek to put those groups at a disadvantage, in a phenomenon called out-group bias.

"[Out-group bias] is important to understand, because it's hardwired into our brains through evolution," Toner told delegates. "This is how the human race has survived; people banded together with people like themselves and fought off people who are not like them. What does that mean? That means men favour men, in general, and that's how you get patriarchal systems operating."

Toner also highlighted the idea that problems in gender areas are often attributed to unconscious bias. But he cautioned that while acknowledging that unconscious bias exists is important, it's crucial to ensure that doing so will not legitimise prejudice: "We don't want people to use unconscious bias as a reason for them to be sexist or racist [etc]," he said.

He added that while unconscious bias training is important – as it allows staff to gain a better understanding of the issue – it doesn't remove it altogether and also doesn't deal with conscious bias.

Toner said every organisation has people with conscious bias, including some with people who simply believe men are going to be better in any role than women. And the only solution for that is to confront the bias, he said, adding: "You need to counsel and maybe remove people who are managers with racist or sexist beliefs." ■