

Here's how to get more women promoted to top jobs in universities

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Women may now [outnumber men](#) in the ranks of university students but men still outnumber [women in leadership](#) roles in nearly all areas of professional workplaces.

This is true within the university system itself: only 30% of professors (Level E) and associate professors (Level D) [are women](#). For women in academia, the glass ceiling is real, and years of equal opportunity policies and procedures have failed to break down this barrier.

This gender imbalance has been recognised as a national problem with the recent launch of the Science in Australia Gender Equity ([SAGE](#)) pilot, based on the principles of the UK's [Athena Swan Charter](#).

SAGE aims to address the situation for the Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) areas that traditionally have very low participation by women.

Make the funding count

Once fully rolled out, universities and research organisations may not be eligible for National Health and Medical Research Council or Australian Research Council funding unless they can show a strong commitment to gender equity at senior levels.

Notably, more than half of Australia's universities and medical institutes signed up for the pilot in September this year.

The SAGE pilot promises to provide sufficient incentive for universities to rethink how to support female academics to increase the number of women in senior positions.

Apart from appointing new talent, universities will need to look at their current female workforce. They will need to reconsider how to support career development for female academics appointed at lower levels, towards application for promotion.

But why are women not transitioning through to higher levels?

One [reason](#) could be is that female academics may be reticent to push forward as quickly as their male colleagues. This could be due to the low number of female role models or a lack of mentors. Barriers to women's progression may also include a [lack of networks and socialisation](#).

One [study](#) found that women start their academic careers at lower levels than men. Close to three quarters of the women surveyed started below the level of lecturer (typically at associate lecturer or research assistant level). The figure was closer to around 50% for men.

One good point is that women generally have a higher success rate than men in getting promoted. But the problem is that not enough women are seeking promotion in the first place. That's not the case for men who are often encouraged to seek promotion.

Women encouraging women

At Swinburne University of Technology, data show the percentage of women applying for promotion out of all female academics is equal to the percentage of men.

But again the two groups differ by the lower levels of appointment of female academics when they apply for promotion. This results in more women applying for promotion to lecturer and senior lecturer levels while more

men apply for the more senior levels of associate professor and professor.

So without intervention, the gender imbalance at senior levels will remain unchanged.

To address this, we set up a peer-support promotion program which resulted in a record number of female academics applying for promotion.

Driven from within the group of female academics at Swinburne, the program included a number of methods to motivate women to apply for promotion. They included information sessions from university leaders and Human Resources combined with regular peer-group meetings.

This helped empower female academics to better understand their own strengths and the promotion process. It also resulted in a support structure for women in the process of applying for promotion.

All female academics were invited to participate as mentee, mentor or both early in the year. This resulted in around 80 participants in the six month program and included a number of full professors.

Emphasis in this program was to create an environment of trust and mutual support. The aim was to build confidence in the mentees' abilities, and to guide their understanding of their level of readiness for promotion. This was achieved by showing examples, sharing ideas, practice and advice, and by providing mentorship from more senior women.

It worked!

As a result of this peer-support program, the number of promotion applications from women doubled this year, nearly reaching parity with applications from men for the first time. The promotion process is still ongoing but assuming similar success rates to the past, this will increase the pool of women available for promotion into senior academic positions.

Our program shows that when women take their careers into their own hands and support each other, they can build confidence and are empowered to take the leap and apply for promotion.

The next step is to establish a more comprehensive career development program for female academics to embed the peer-support structure within the university.

If we can improve the promotion prospects for female academics to more senior positions then others can do it too.

Given the direction that has been initiated by SAGE which is set to have implications for external funding schemes, we encourage other universities to consider similar internal peer-support programs.