Women get a much needed boost in research funding gender equity plan

November 20 2015, by Sarah Maddison

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Women make up 44% of Australian academics, but just 24% of professors. One of the contributing factors for this disparity is that there are fewer women applying for research grants than men, even though women are just as successful at winning grants as men.

Given that research grant success is a key promotion criterion at most institutes, this hampers the ability of women to reach senior positions. So if we can encourage more women to apply for grants, then this could help increase the number of women professors.

This week saw the Australian Research Council (ARC) announce its Gender Equality Action Plan. This includes a range of actions aimed to ensure equal opportunity for men and women to participate in its National Competitive Grants Programme.

The ARC has already included maternity and paternity leave for all grants, and part-time options for early and mid career researchers with children or other carer responsibilities. It has also extended the eligibility criteria of some grants to account for time out of research for maternity leave and carer responsibilities.

Previously, the ARC would rate research output relative to the number of years since PhD completion, which would disadvantage women who had taken time out to start a family. Now research performance is based on the opportunity the researcher has had to do research.

The ARC has also introduced two prestigious Australian Laureate Fellowships specifically targeted for outstanding women.

The ARC Gender Equality Action Plan collects all these initiatives into a single document, along with new initiatives such as improving the gender balance of ARC selection committee members, raising awareness of parental leave entitlements and part-time options, and monitoring the impact of recent changes to eligibility and leave provisions.

ARC Centres of Excellence will also be required to develop and implement an equity plan.

It will also consider unconscious bias training for grant assessors and the ARC College of Experts, who are the people who ultimately decide who gets funded and who does not.

Why change is needed

These initiatives are long overdue and whole-heartedly supported by the academic community.

While there is still debate over whether parenthood decreases productivity among academics, various studies show that the rate of research output drops for women returning from maternity leave and their research output is affected until their children are teenagers.

This effect is also far greater for mothers than fathers. A recent study of 10,000 economists found the research productivity of mothers dropped by 17% compared to 5% for fathers.

Targets and quotas make some people uncomfortable. But such actions are probably needed to create the disruptive change required to re-balance gender inequities. While differences in the grant success rates for men and women are relatively small, there are enormous differences in the numbers of men and women applying for ARC funding across almost all disciplines.

In the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) areas, between three and seven times more men than women are applying for grants. In the HASS (health, arts and social science) areas, this drops to one to three times more men than women applying. There are more women than men applying for ARC grants in only two fields of research: education; and language, communication and culture.

This is why the two targeted Laureate Fellowships (one in STEM and

one in HASS) are accompanied by additional funds to support ambassadorial activities by the recipient to promote women in research and to mentor early career researchers.

Now that research output is judged relative to opportunity, career breaks and non-research tasks (like heavy teaching and administrative loads) can be taken into consideration.

Going forward

The ARC has no control over the employment conditions or workplace culture in universities, but it does control the research funding. Because ARC grants are generally paid to organisations rather than to researchers, they can put conditions on the funding. The ARC requires research institutes to comply with the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 when signing funding agreements.

The ARC also expects institutes to have a gender equity policy in place. If the ARC wanted to push the issue, it could require institutes to hold a Workplace Gender Equality Agency Employer of Choice for Gender Equality award, for example. Or it could require institutes to participate in programs like the Science Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) initiative.

The Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering recently launched this pilot of the Athena SWAN Charter, which aims to improve gender equity and increase participation of women in STEMM (the second "M" is for medicine). The SAGE pilot is strongly supported by the ARC.

The Athena SWAN initiative began in the United Kingdom with the aim of encouraging and supporting women in STEMM careers. Since 2011, UK medical research institutes have been required to have an Athena SWAN award to receive research funds.

Will the ARC head in that same direction? There is no doubt that funding drives behaviour. And if the ARC Gender Equality Action Plan can drive good behaviours, then it will be a great success.

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