



Australian Higher Education Joint Sector Position Statement

Proposal

That sector leaders note this Briefing Paper and consider participating in the Joint Sector Position Statement, including the attached commitment to agreed actions within respective institutions and across the sector to preserve gender equity as a higher education priority during and after COVID-19.

Briefing Paper

Purpose

This proposal invites Australian universities and Higher Education sector partners to agree on common actions within each institution and across the sector to ensure that in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we collectively build on the important progress already achieved by individual institutions and the whole sector in gender equity. Our high performance in this area was recently acknowledged by the [Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2020](#), where three Australian universities ranked globally in the top ten measuring impact on gender equality. To ensure higher education emerges from COVID-19 without irretrievable loss of this momentum in gender equity, it will be crucial to apply a gender lens to short, medium and long-term institutional and sector-wide responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Joint Sector Position Statement:

- offers opportunities and benefits for universities to jointly demonstrate leadership in gender equity during and after COVID-19;
- mitigates the gendered economic and social impacts of COVID-19 for staff and students; and
- invites Australian universities to commit to five actions outlined within the attached 'Sector Position' to preserve gender equity and diversity efforts as a sector, and to then embed these within their own institutions.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reshaped our society. In the rush to manage this health and economic crisis, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this will have a *gendered* impact extending beyond the initial crisis period. The [United Nations' Secretary General António Guterres](#) brought attention to the gendered impact of COVID-19 on 10 April 2020, calling for urgent and immediate action. He stated that the pandemic is having "devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls" and urged governments and institutions to put gender issues at the centre of COVID-19 responses.

Early analysis confirms a need to address indicators that women are facing deep social and economic effects from the pandemic (e.g., [UN Policy Brief](#), [The Lancet](#), and [Broad Agenda](#)). Both the [UN](#) and the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) have suggested that the impact on women stands to undo decades of progress towards gender equality *and* poses an amplified risk of gendered violence.

Guiding Principles

The UN Secretary General has called on institutions to act in three ways:

1. ensure women's equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making.
2. drive transformative change for equality by addressing the paid and unpaid care economy; and
3. target women and girls in all efforts to address the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.

Economic and Social Impacts of COVID-19

If higher education institutions do not apply a gender lens to decision making and ignore the gendered effects of COVID 19, the negative economic and social impacts will be felt for generations to come. The [European Institute for Gender Equity research](#) reminds us that gender equity leads to economic growth and that addressing different inequities together is likely to generate more positive impacts, rather than tackling them one by one in isolation.

It is now common knowledge that diversity in business decision making leads to better business outcomes – not only in financial terms but also in innovation, morale, and reputation. Without conscious monitoring and commitment, decisions can have disproportionate gendered outcomes and unintended consequences. Economic costs include lost business for Australian universities and the higher education sector through the loss of expertise, skill and talent, not only to ride through the current COVID-19 experience but in the rebuilding and alignment of the business for the future. Economic loss would also be significant to our businesses if gendered decisions are made which negatively affect the staff and student research pipeline. Disproportionate financial impact on individuals ripples through families impacting future generations, increasing social disadvantage and influencing their decisions about education. Financial investment to progress gender equity has been significant to date and will take years to recover if rolled back.

Employment insecurity and educational attainment are also important [social determinants of health and well-being](#). The COVID-19 situation heavily impacts our female staff and students, particularly those who are primary carers for children and others; those experiencing domestic or family violence, and/or come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. For female students, the interruption and compounding stresses of COVID-19 are likely to make it more difficult to continue their studies without significant support from universities. The forecasted long-term economic downturn may see many students struggle to re-engage with higher education in the future.

In university workplaces, perceived job insecurity, even where it is without actual job loss, will have an [adverse effect on health outcomes](#). Despite government provisions (e.g., [special access to superannuation](#) for casuals and contractors to offer immediate income relief) this comes with long-term cost that reinforces future financial insecurity, particularly for [women who have up to two-fifths less super than men](#). This is exacerbated by the higher proportions of female staff performing casual work in universities and the sector-wide [gender pay gap](#).

Australian researchers [Nour and Taksa \(2020\)](#) also remind us that current threats to women's livelihood are compounded by the fact that women perform the [greater share of unpaid care work](#). Globally such work

is equivalent to 2 billion people working on a full-time basis and accounts for 41.3 per cent of GDP in Australia. COVID-19 has seen these caring responsibilities peak.

The COVID-19 crisis has also highlighted the increased vulnerability for particular groups, including those who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, trans, gender non-binary or gender neutral, LGBTIQ+, first in family and/or from lower socio-economic backgrounds, isolated from support and professional networks overseas, of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (including of Asian backgrounds facing a sharp rise in racism), and those living with disability (see [Markham, 2020](#); [Bozorgmehr et al., 2020](#).)

Crisis response to COVID-19 that does not place gender equity at its centre will see far reaching social impacts, both in terms of perpetuating or widening existing gender inequalities (such as impacts on children and/or women growing older into poverty) as well as reputational damage to institutions.

Without a gender-responsive focus, the sector's necessary financial management of the COVID-19 crisis risks deepening existing economic and social inequalities among current staff and along the student pipeline.

Leadership Opportunities During and After COVID-19

Universities and sector partners participating in this Joint Sector Position Statement will demonstrate leadership in gender equity in emerging areas during and after COVID-19 both within their institutions and in broader social impact. This would enable the sector and its partners to utilise existing information-sharing networks and reporting structures, as appropriate, to publicise initiatives and progress.

Retaining women researchers and female perspectives in research

Our Challenge

In many of our institutions women are disproportionately represented in more junior levels of academia and in casual and part-time academic and professional roles. Women are also broadly underrepresented in STEMM disciplines across the sector. Yet, the sector is uniquely placed to use research expertise and efforts to bring a deeper understanding of the gendered impacts of this pandemic and the ways in which inequities can be reduced during the crisis and recovery stages.

Possible Solutions

Four actions are recommended:

- Ensure female perspectives and fairness in female representation in research as we come to better understand the COVID-19 virus, illness, and impact, especially in medical, health, allied health, humanities and social sciences teams.
- Ensure women are enabled to equitably participate and contribute to solving the 'wicked' problems associated with COVID -19.
- Actively advocate for gender equity in competitive national, state and local research funding structures and schemes, and support women *via* targeted local initiatives which will strengthen our institutions as we emerge from COVID-19. This includes female representation as members of review panels and funding decision making bodies and as recipients of funding.
- Commit to continuing efforts to improve female representation in areas of persistent underrepresentation, especially in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine.

Adopting creative approaches to workload changes

Our Challenge

Adaptation to the COVID-19 environment has seen most academic and key professional staff leading the transition to online learning. Both increases and decreases to workloads as a result of COVID-19 pose specific gender concerns. Since more women perform teaching and occupy student-facing roles, an unanticipated spike in workload due to rapid online learning design and increased pastoral care of students impacts women disproportionately. This limits [time for research](#) which is likely to affect career progression/promotion and, over time, gender balanced leadership within institutions.

Where workloads have reduced due to COVID-19, and where institutions are seeking financial tightening, women are more vulnerable by virtue of being disproportionately represented in casual, sessional, fixed-term and part-time appointments across the sector. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff experience higher employment precarity across the sector and are therefore at even greater risk.

Possible Solutions

Drawing on feedback from staff and students:

- Seek creative ways of utilising the workforce, for example by considering the broader skill sets and abilities of staff and students, new learnings for management resulting from the COVID-19 environment, and the benefits of more flexible working arrangements for certain staff (as below).
- Identify innovative ways of working and sharing workloads in the interests of long-term gender equity.
- Monitor institutional decision making to ensure there are protections in place for staff and students who have intersecting levels of disadvantage. This is key to retaining diversity of perspective in our institutions, our sector and our society, to not only ameliorate deep-seated health, social and economic inequalities for historically disadvantaged cohorts, but also to retain diverse talent, perspective, and reputation with diverse communities.

Responding to issues of Domestic and Family Violence

Our Challenge

Domestic and Family Violence remains a scourge and a national embarrassment in Australia. The term 'Shadow Pandemic' has been used to describe a widespread global outbreak of domestic and family violence triggered by circumstances of COVID-19 (e.g., [UN Women](#)). Several organisations ([Pro Bono Australia](#), [Gender Equity Victoria](#), [Australian Human Rights Commission](#)) warn that domestic and family violence may become the most pressing gender issue arising from COVID-19, requiring urgent and non-conventional crisis response.

A [recent survey](#) by Women's Safety NSW showed frontline workers have already reported a dramatic spike in gendered violence and in demand and complexity of DFV cases. This spike appears to be triggered by [traditional antecedents](#) such as heightened financial, health and social pressure, with additional [compounding factors](#) of COVID-19 severely limiting options for people facing violence in their home (e.g., social-distancing, enforced isolation, travel bans, border closures, and study and/or work from home). [The UN Policy Briefing](#) noted that "many women are being forced to 'lockdown' at home with their abusers at the same time that services to support survivors are being disrupted or made inaccessible" (p.2). Various organisations ([UN Human Rights](#), [ACON](#), [Queerspace](#)) have also raised concern for the wellbeing of non-binary and LGBTIQ+ individuals forced into unsupportive or hostile home environments across the COVID-19 period.

Possible Solutions

Universities have an opportunity to:

- Show best practice responses in their own institutions for those experiencing domestic and family violence.
- Lead social impact through contributing to the public policy debate and undertake research to advance our knowledge and effectiveness in this area, including specific learnings from COVID-19 quarantining scenarios.

Championing innovative flexible work and study arrangements

Our Challenge

[UN's Policy Briefing](#) notes that during COVID-19 “unpaid care work has increased, with children out of school, heightened care needs of older persons, and overwhelmed health services” (p.2). [Secretary General Guterres cautioned](#) that without adequate support this will have ‘grossly imbalanced’ long-term cost on the economic, health and social wellbeing of women. Family and carer responsibilities drive gender inequality in both career and study progress. This dynamic has intensified as women face rising demand for unpaid care work during COVID-19 and this is likely to continue throughout the recovery period.

Universities have the opportunity to lead and inform public policy debates and to act as exemplars of innovative flexibility in work and study, including forging new ways of approaching the issue of flexible work and family and domestic responsibilities. Effective action could challenge deep-seated social gender inequities and help to mitigate longer-term impacts on women’s [education](#) and [workplace participation](#) including for our current and prospective female staff and students.

Possible Solutions

To protect against inequities which will have long-term impact on women’s [education](#) and [workplace participation](#) including our current and prospective female staff and students, universities can:

- Demonstrate leadership which encourages flexible working arrangements and leave provisions for all staff.
- Lead on public policy debates around flexible working arrangements, carer and family responsibilities, the sharing of domestic work, diversity management, and inclusive management practice.