



Australian Government
Chief Scientist

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We're not waiting for generational change

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It's time to notice

A few weeks ago, an article turned up in my email inbox.

It was by Tim Dean, the editor of the website “The Conversation”. And it was about a scandal that blew up after my appointment was announced last October.

Of course I don't like to see my name attached to *any* scandal – so I read Tim's article with great interest.

It turns out that Tim put together a story back in October that included a round-up of comments from senior figures in science. It just so happened that every one of the senior figures he spoke to were men.

So he failed the equivalent of the “panel pledge” that Elizabeth Broderick spoke about.

That is, a man published an article on men talking about a man.

That last man just happened to be me – but I declare: it was not my fault! It was Tim's fault – because he hadn't noticed. And that was precisely Tim's point.

If we *don't* notice – if we *don't* consciously commit to the goal of eliminating gender imbalance – then we perpetuate it.

On the other hand, if we *do* notice, then ultimately we can work in a society in which we no longer *need* to notice – because gender imbalance has gone to the dustbin of history, where it belongs.

So we are here today to notice.

- To reflect on what we have done well.
- To reiterate that we need to do better.
- To work out what that means in practical terms.
- And most importantly, *to commit to be held to account* for what we achieve.

The goal

And this is vital work. I say this personally, and as Chief Scientist.

I look to universities not just to reflect our society today, but to model the society we want to be tomorrow.

For ten centuries, universities have been drivers of social change. And if you don't agree with that statement, perhaps you are sitting in the wrong room.

Fighting gender imbalance is not just in our interests – it ought to be in our institutional DNA.

So I refuse to give way to the tyranny of low expectations! When I look across the country, I want to see, on average, the same presence in management, the same presence in teaching and research positions, and the same salaries across senior levels. And I want to see in every discipline, a shared understanding that diversity is strength.

On my reading of the evidence, we are not there yet.

The path to the status quo

Here are a few facts from the STEM Workforce Report published by my office this year.

It draws on the latest available data from a comprehensive nationwide survey – better known as the national Census. The last one was in 2011. At that time, of all university graduates in STEM fields, fewer than *one in three* were female.

One in three male STEM graduates was in the top income bracket – but fewer than one in six women.

Women made up more than half the early career researcher population – but fewer than one in five of our senior academics.

That's a snapshot in time. To understand it, we need to view it in context.

We *are* seeing progress, if not at the rate we want to see.

Of course, there has been massive improvement since the late 1940s, when the brilliant radio astronomer Ruby Payne Scott had to conceal her marriage to keep her job at the CSIRO – and then had to resign for the crime of pregnancy.

Even in the past decade, there has been measurable progress.

We know that the number of graduates overall is increasing. Against this background of growth, in the five years to 2011, the number of female

STEM university graduates grew faster than the number of males: a 35 per cent increase for women, compared to 29 per cent for men.

And just this week, our national press gave up its usual preoccupation with failure and catastrophe, to celebrate the fact that the first female student has been selected for the Australian Informatics team for the Science and Mathematics Olympiads.

As Chief Scientist, I made a commitment that I would celebrate great Australian achievements in every way I can. Where I can celebrate Australian women in science, I'm very proud to do so.

But let me say it clearly: celebrating progress does not mean settling for the status quo.

2011 is the baseline. When the 2016 Census data becomes available, we will be able to read the trends.

And in the meantime, we will continue to say to women that there are *solutions* and not just problems in their path.

Accelerating change

So how do we accelerate change, in ways that genuinely make a difference for women?

Well, we're scientists and engineers – we ought to know how to set about a hard problem.

- Define it.
- Analyse it.
- Test it.
- Iterate.
- Scale up for national delivery.

We're also leaders and innovators – so we know something about changing human behaviour as well. We need to:

- Commit to a goal – whole-heartedly
- Lead from the top
- Explain what we're doing
- Be prepared to be held to account

As we heard from Susan, Athena SWAN takes exactly that approach. It makes incentives not just to clear the bar, but to clear it, *raise it*, and set the ambition for others in turn.

It recognises that the challenge and the solution will not be the same in every university. And so it factors in the space to listen to women and learn from what works – be it targeted grants and fellowships; more allowance for career time-outs; hard recruitment targets and a strong representation of women on selection panels; mentoring programs or other initiatives.

This is directed evolution, at national scale!

And the Australian Athena Swan pilot will allow us to take the same approach across the broader program framework.

From my own experience, I know we can change the culture – if we try.

Look at the Academy of Technology and Engineering (ATSE) – a body that represents some of the most stubbornly male-dominated disciplines in our sector. Five years ago we took action. We set a hard target of a minimum 30 per cent new Fellows to be female. We achieved it in every one of the last five years.

And let me assure you, as the former President – we did not in any way compromise quality to reach that point. We said we wouldn't, and we didn't have to.

And the Academy is not stopping there – as we see in so many institutions, the more women on board, the more they shape the culture, and the faster we all progress.

Whatever we do, we need to drive that process – not simply wait for generational change.

THANK YOU