Appendix 6

Women Academics at Macquarie University: Steady Career Progress

Sarah Levin and Ed Davis

Across the university sector, there is evidence which suggests that the academic careers of many women have not advanced despite their competence and their academic achievements. In general, women remain clustered at the lower levels of academia, although there is a wide variation between the traditionally female disciplines such as the humanities, health, education and the traditionally male disciplines of engineering, architecture and agriculture. 

1. Introduction

From its beginnings, women academics at Macquarie University have been relatively well represented and their representation at higher levels has steadily improved. Many factors have contributed to this. The birth of the new university coincided with social and economic changes which have altered typical life patterns and expectations. Widespread availability of education and socially aware legislation has encouraged and enabled women to exert more control over their lives, in particular, their working lives.

In 1995, Professor Valerie Pratt, foundation director of the Affirmative Action Agency, reported on the relative strengths and weaknesses of Macquarie’s equal opportunity and affirmative action program. Achievements and future objectives were discussed with staff. Significant achievements included the successful integration of EEO and affirmative action plans into the enterprise-bargaining process and initiatives in the research plan to assist women. Professor Pratt noted that Macquarie was the first university to abolish compulsory age retirement before it was required by law.

Elsewhere, the effects of anti-discrimination legislation have been described as “slow but patchy”. Citing convincing evidence, Anne Summers asserted that despite earlier gains, progress towards equality for women has stalled and is now in reverse.

Referring to the number of women in chief executive and senior executive and management roles, Summers observed that women appear to have done better in universities. At Macquarie University, our statistics show that many women academic staff have been successful in progressing to higher positions. Australia’s first woman vice-chancellor was appointed by Macquarie University in 1987. Women academics have continued to be well represented as deans and heads of departments across a range of disciplines.

In this study, we examine the progress Macquarie University women academics have made in the university. Our statistics show steady progress in the proportion of women academics moving to higher academic levels.

2. Background: Development of Ideals of Social Justice for Women in Australia

In 1973, the federal government ratified the International Labour Organisation Convention No.111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation). In so doing, it supported the concept of “equality of opportunity and treatment in respect of employment and occupation”, with the aim of eliminating discrimination on the basis of race, sex, political opinion and social origin. The NSW Government introduced anti-discrimination legislation in 1977 (Grimes, 1990 cites Ronalds, 1979:3). Following the endorsement of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1983, the federal Sex Discrimination Act was introduced in 1984. Equal opportunity and affirmative action legislation and policies were established throughout Australia during the 1980s.

The federal Sex Discrimination Act was developed to promote equality between men and women and eliminate discrimination on the basis of sex, marital status and pregnancy by eliminating discrimination and harassment in the workplace, in educational institutions, and in the provision of accommodation and administration of federal programs.

In the early 1990s, a parliamentary committee of inquiry into equal opportunity and the status of women was set up by federal government to assess the impact of the legislation. Halfway to Equal, the report of the 16-member committee (which included one woman) noted that despite women’s significantly increased participation in the workforce since World War 2, a number of long-standing adverse workforce characteristics, including indirect and direct discrimination, continued to affect them. Significantly, although women comprised 42 percent of the paid workforce, they were poorly represented in upper-management positions in both the public and private sectors.
The report concluded that although the legislation had significantly increased equal opportunity and equal status for women, there was still a long way to go:

...particularly in the professions and academia where men and women generally enter the field with equivalent qualifications and often in similar numbers. Despite this, the higher status and better remunerated positions are overwhelmingly held by men (p.52).

The committee also expressed concern about the increased rate of casualisation of the work force, although they acknowledged that part-time and casual work were often preferred by women with young children.

They concluded that:

...while cases of overt discrimination continue, the evidence suggests that it is indirect discrimination which contributes more significantly to the existence of the so-called glass ceiling (p82.)

A comprehensive review of the Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986, was initiated by the federal government in 1998 to assess the effectiveness of the legislation in dealing with “the nature and magnitude of the problem that the Affirmative Action Act is intended to address”.

The report Unfinished Business – Equity for Women in Australian Workplaces (1998) evaluated the effects of affirmative action regulation on welfare and equity, economic and regional development, consumer interests, the competitiveness of business and efficient resource allocation and the costs compliance.7 A challenge for the committee was to reconcile business and social-justice goals.

Burton (1988) contended that the pursuit of equity by acceptance of the “merit” principle should ensure that the talents and expertise of all staff are recognised and rewarded appropriately.8 It was on this basis that business organisations accepted equity principles. However, Burton further argued that defining “merit” is complex as this concept is often construed in terms of uncritically accepted social norms. Similarly, Thornton (1990) discussed the inherent contradiction between social-justice and business imperatives, as did Poiner and Wills (1991) who contended that promoting EEO as a desirable business strategy inevitably marginalises social justice.9 10

Reporting on the committee’s findings, Bevan et al. (1988) noted that there appeared to be widespread acceptance that the benefits (to business) outweighed the costs. The executive summary maintained that the prevailing “step based approach to affirmative action is . . . inconsistent with a business environment . . . which increasingly emphasises outcomes and leaves managers to determine the processes that are most effective in delivering those outcomes, at the workplace level, that are consistent with their wider corporate strategies”.

Following submission of the review, the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act (1999) (Cwth) came into effect on 1 January 2000.11 This act promoted the principle that employment for women should be dealt with on the basis of merit, eliminating discrimination in employment-related matters and fostering workplace consultation between employers and employees on issues concerning equal opportunity for women in relation to employment.12

3. Women Academics in Australian Universities

Among universities’ academic and general staff, women have tended to be disproportionately represented at lower-paid and lower-status levels of staff. In the early 1980s, Cass, Dawson, Temple, Wills and Winkler (1983) surveyed Sydney University women and men academics in terms of a range of demographic variables. Their aim was to discover why there were fewer women “at the top where decisions are made”.13 The percentages of women academics quoted for 1979 are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Women Academics at Selected Universities and Overall (%), 1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>(%) Women Academics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of NSW</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney University</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macquarie University</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Universities</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cass, Dawson, Temple, Wills and Winkler, 1983.

The researchers found that over the period 1972 to 1981, the proportion of women in teaching staff increased slightly (14.0 percent to 16.6 percent; see also Eylan, Elser & Noesjirwan, 1983, p.22).14 Cass et al. (1983) believed that traditional role expectations were deep-rooted in the university system, where the decision makers were predominantly male, who discriminated openly or otherwise against women. They argued that a successful academic career rested on the assumption that academics would not take time out for child-bearing and child rearing, “and they have domestic support systems behind them, most commonly referred to as wives” (Cass et al. 1983).

Reporting on discrimination at Sydney University in 1986, Poiner, Golder and Bishop cited a 1983 study which compared women as a percentage of each academic rank at Macquarie, ANU and Sydney Universities (See Table 2).15 At all levels, from professor to tutor, Macquarie women clearly constituted a greater proportion, with two minor exceptions.

Burton (1991) cited research demonstrating that cultural biases affected women’s employment opportunities in complex ways. She maintained that factors which distorted the assessment of women’s competence included social conditioning, presumed sex-determined skills, and presumed family situations affecting the workplace.16 Consequently women’s capabilities did not gain full recognition when they applied for positions and promotion.
In 1992, the Affirmative Action Agency reviewed the progress of higher education institutions in improving the position of women employees. The report noted that both general and academic staff women were usually at the lower levels of university hierarchies. Moreover, they were strongly over-represented in certain disciplines such as health sciences and humanities, and under represented in areas like engineering and economics.

A comprehensive study of pay differences between university men and women employees by Probert et al. (1998) concluded that:

- barriers ... such as family responsibilities (were) largely inhibiting the ability of women generally to meet the criteria identified as critical to a successful academic career.

Gardiner (1998), researching women in Australian universities, concluded that "the assumed standard for academic career success values highly years of uninterrupted research experience. (This is) ... inherently difficult to achieve for many women academics because it does not take account of the current general distribution of responsibilities within families." 20

### 4. Women's Careers at Macquarie

The Macquarie University Annual Report of 2005 reports that:

In 1964 Macquarie University was the first institution in Australia for more than 50 years to be set up as a full research-based, independent university rather than as a university college under the wing of a traditional university. It was described as a bold, radical experiment – and the passage of 40 years has shown it to be an extremely successful one.

During its 40th anniversary, Macquarie’s founding values of innovation, research, industry and other community links, interdisciplinarity, flexible multi-mode access including distance education and cutting-edge use of new technologies, were strongly evident, enhanced by a vital internationalisation and commercially astute entrepreneurship.

Recognised as “Australia’s Innovative University” from the outset, not only was Macquarie able to break with tradition, it was encouraged to do so, as the successful pioneer in the group of 1960s and 1970s universities now known as the Innovative Research Universities Australia.

In the 1960s, the Menzies Government supported an unprecedented expansion of education in areas that traditionally had been the preserve of state governments. New universities were established, as was a generous Commonwealth scholarship scheme, placing tertiary education within reach of those who otherwise could not have afforded it. Macquarie University was one of the new universities.

Macquarie University’s vision and its creation by a group of men in early 1964 is described in Bruce Mansfield’s account “Liberality of Opportunity”. Mansfield recalled that “Women's organisations protested that no woman was included in a membership of thirty-one”. He quoted the comment of the Sydney Sun, “If women are capable of studying at a university ... they are capable of helping to run one”.

Despite the absence of women creators, the university fathers enthusiastically promoted their ideal of an “innovative” university. Their vision related to students and teaching methods. This approach helped to create a responsive environment for other initiatives. Mansfield describes the development of women’s campus organisations, advancing the concept of “liberality of opportunity”21 by ensuring and incorporating equal opportunity.

In May 1981, senior women staff members of Macquarie attended a workshop — Women in Higher Education — which inspired the vice-chancellor to organise a university seminar aimed at exploring the position and problems of women at Macquarie. This led to the formation of WAM (Women at Macquarie), an informal group of women staff.

Subsequently, in consultation with the committee of WAM and the University Council’s committee on women’s issues, the vice-chancellor initiated a further project which aimed to “review the present status and opportunities for the advancement of women at Macquarie, and to advise the Vice-Chancellor ... on appropriate measures to effect change” (Eyland, Elder & Noesjirwan, August 1983). 22

The “Disempowered Academic Woman” was an invented representative character based on a combination of the project’s findings. Described as “currently employed at Macquarie University as a tutor or temporary lecturer... she will almost certainly lose her contract position at Macquarie University within the next two or three years ... despite her very high qualifications (PhD), excellent teaching and research record and national or international recognition as a scholar”.

### Table 2: Women Academics at Selected Universities: (%) Academic Rank (1983)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Faculties</th>
<th>Macquarie University %</th>
<th>ANU %</th>
<th>University of Sydney %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate Professor (Reader)</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>13.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior / Principal Tutor</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>54.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tutor</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>40.0</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Sawer, 1984:80 Staff and Student Statistics: The University of Sydney 1983. Totals of staff at each level are not cited.
Making the Link

Recommendations which were implemented included the issuing of an equal opportunity statement, the appointment of an equal opportunity officer, and the establishment of an equal opportunity committee “to oversee the implementation of policies designed to promote and establish an equitable working environment”. There were also recommendations regarding conduct of personnel matters and employment practices.

Mansfield observed that the first EEO officer “… concentrated on involving the university community as a whole in looking at how it operated, and then making sure that those reflections were not simply restricted to issues relating to ‘women, aborigines, ethnics and the disabled’. ‘Equal Opportunity’ at Macquarie thus developed in its widest sense to involve issues of fairness, equity and liberality of opportunity”.

In 1987, Macquarie University was the first university to appoint a woman as vice-chancellor, Professor Di Yerbury.

Citing the employment statistics in 1983, Grimes (1990) attributed women’s apparent success at Macquarie University to the lack of large male-dominated faculties such as engineering and medicine. Women academics were consistently well represented at higher levels.

In her review of Australian universities, Burton (1997) commented on positive patterns of progress towards gender equity at Macquarie University, to the lack of large male-dominated faculties such as engineering and medicine. Women academics were consistently well represented at higher levels.

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Application rates for promotion by academic women have historically been somewhat lower than their representation across the sector, although women have generally been as successful as their male colleagues when they apply. To further strengthen the pool of female candidates at senior levels the university has actively encouraged suitably qualified women to apply for advancement. This has resulted in an increase in female staff applications.

Enterprise Agreements

Macquarie University enterprise agreements include clauses compliant with state and federal anti-discrimination legislation. Relevant policies across all employment matters have been incorporated into the agreements. The current enterprise agreement includes measures which provide equitable treatment for women, including paid and unpaid parental leave to enable staff to reconcile work and family responsibilities. Four on-site childcare facilities, vacation-care, flexible-work arrangements, and the conversion of casual staff to part-

Table 3. Macquarie University Female Academic Staff: (%) Academic Classification, 1968-2005

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<tr>
<td>Level E: Professor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level D: Assoc Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level C: Senior Lecturer</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level B: Lecturer</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level A: Tutor/ Senior Tutor/ Assoc. Lecturer</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Academic Staff</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>738</td>
<td>859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total % women</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Women Senior Lecturer &amp; above</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

time continuing status are other supportive provisions. Promotion and incremental progression are based both on merit and satisfactory performance of duties. The approval of leave and advancement through either promotion or incremental progression are not subject to the financial capacity of the budget unit to pay. Wherever possible, all deliberative and consultative committees of the university are expected to have gender balance.

Employer of Choice for Women

On 6 January 2004, Vice-Chancellor Di Yerbury announced that:

Macquarie has again been awarded the EOWA “Employer of Choice for Women” citation. This is an annual citation awarded to employers which assist their female workforces to achieve their potential through work conditions and practices such as recruitment practices, professional development and provision of part-time work, parental leave and childcare.

Macquarie University 2003 Employer of Choice for Women Application described “the inclusive culture at Macquarie (which is) evident in general staff satisfaction and the support women receive from colleagues and managers. Macquarie is particularly proud of its achievements in encouraging women to return to their careers following the birth of a child. Separation rates for women following parental leave have reduced to an all-time low of 6 percent for the current 12-month reporting period.

The application also pointed out that:

Women currently occupy 4-9 deans positions. Women have occupied 3-6 of these positions since this organisational structure was established in 1999. Women comprise 42 percent of academic staff . . . Macquarie women are at least as successful as men in competing internally for promotions and grants.

This success was repeated in 2004 and again in 2005. On September 21, 2005, it was announced that:

Macquarie University was today named winner of a significant 2005 Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) Business Achievement Award. These federal government awards are designed to showcase leading-edge initiatives being used to attract and retain women in the workforce. Macquarie’s generous parental leave, partner’s leave and carer’s leave provisions won it the “Outstanding EEO Practice for the Advancement of Women” category, edging out finalists Citigroup Global Markets, ExxonMobil and Westpac.27

It is of further interest that several of the top administrative posts are also held by women. In 2005, the posts of the chief finance officer, librarian, director of IT and director of public relations and marketing were all held by women.

5. Conclusion: Steady, Significant Progress

The creation of Macquarie University coincided with the emergence of growing awareness of the widespread discrimination against women in many aspects of their lives. The enthusiasm of the university fathers was not diminished by weighty tradition of male-dominated faculties as existed in the “sandstone” universities. Talented women, few at first, but in ever-increasing numbers, have been there to accept the benefits due to them.

Apart from the lack of long-established male hierarchy and male-oriented traditions, other significant factors to benefit women may have been the introduction of federal and state anti-discrimination legislation, the accent on “innovation” and the leadership of Australia’s first female vice-chancellor.

Despite the “slow but patchy progress” of women described elsewhere, Macquarie women academics have made steady, significant progress. Gender-based discriminatory practices have been less prevalent and women academics have found the Macquarie University working environment to be very supportive. The arguable tension between social justice and financial outcomes is not in evidence. Macquarie University enterprise agreements have concurrently accorded social justice by providing significant benefits for women whilst pursuing management goals aimed at efficient and effective financial outcomes. Flexible work practices to accommodate family responsibilities have assisted women to maintain their careers.

This is an unusual case study tracing developments over a period of nearly 40 years. It provides a telling example of progress in pursuit of equal employment opportunity.

FOOTNOTES

7. Unfinished Business – Equity for Women in Australian Workplaces, 1998. This report was chaired by Deanne Bevan.
12. Presumably the addition of Clause (c) was intended to ensure correlation between anti-discrimination measures and business outcomes.
15. Poiner, Golder and Bishop, 1986.


REFERENCES


Poiner, G., Golder, H., and Bishop, R. Sydney University in 1986.


