

Name of Project	The Ascent Program: Supporting women's promotion in STEM via mentoring and a writing retreat
Chief Investigator	Prof. Amy Diedrich
College/Institute/Directorate	College of Science & Engineering
Funding	\$8,000

Relevance of the Project to JCU's gender equity priorities.

This project addresses three of the VC Gender Equity Project Fund's priority areas:

1. Women's promotion journeys and support for navigating promotions;
2. Succession planning for leadership positions to ensure equity in leadership pathways; and
3. Increasing male participation in mentoring and sponsorship of female academics.

The project will formalise a combined program of peer-to-peer mentoring, senior-to-junior mentoring, and a residential writing retreat, enabling women at Level B and above to work collaboratively on promotion applications with the support of peers and senior mentors. Anecdotal evidence from within CSE suggests that women at Level B frequently delay applying for promotion to Level C, citing uncertainty about meeting promotion criteria and limited access to peer support and mentoring. Women at Levels C and D represent the primary pipeline from which future academic leaders are drawn; supporting their progression to Level D and E is therefore essential for achieving equity in leadership pathways across the University.

This proposal responds to evidence from within CSE that structured peer mentoring and dedicated writing time meaningfully improve promotion application rates and outcomes for women.

Objectives

The issue

Despite JCU's commitment to gender equity, women remain underrepresented at senior academic levels (D and E). A key barrier is the promotion process itself: women are less likely to apply for promotion, and when they do, they frequently face structural disadvantages including heavier service and teaching loads, less protected research time, and fewer informal networks of peer support and senior sponsorship.

The solution is not to train women to be better at promotion — it is to remove structural barriers and provide the kind of collegial networks that male academics access more readily through informal networks. This project takes that approach, building on an existing CSE program that has already demonstrated results.

The program

The proposed program combines three complementary elements:

1. *Peer-to-peer mentoring* — Women preparing promotion applications are paired with peers at the same or similar level for mutual support, accountability, and application review. This element was run in CSE in 2025 by Prof. Amy Diedrich with strong outcomes: in 2025, all four women who participated in the peer mentoring program submitted promotion applications, with three successful promotions (to Levels C and D) and one not only due to eligibility.
2. *Senior-junior mentoring* — Women are paired with senior academics (Level D/E, across genders) for guidance on promotion readiness, narrative framing, and application development. This element was run in CSE in 2025 by Prof.

Alana Grech with extremely strong outcomes: 7 women submitting promotion applications and 100% successful.

3. Residential writing retreat — A 2-night off-campus retreat providing women with protected, distraction-free time to work on their promotion applications, with mentors available for support and feedback. Prof. Amy Diedrich ran this previously in 2024 at a local scale – 3 of the 4 women who engaged in this activity were successful in their applications to level C, with all of them completing their applications in time for submission. Informal feedback was that carving time out to work with peers was invaluable to being able to complete on time, and increased confidence and accountability throughout the process.

The retreat will be held at a location centrally accessible to academic women from both the Townsville and Cairns campuses. *This element is new for 2026 and is the primary focus of this EOI.*

The project will gather and report on the experiences of women who engage with the Ascent program this year. This will provide evidence-based insights into how the program supports participants through the promotions process, grounded in their lived experience. The report will include what factors are important to make the program successful or sustainable, and potentially considerations that other Colleges could adopt/adapt. The report will also make observations, where possible, on how the Ascent program fits with other promotion-supportive activities that are on offer.

Milestones

- June 2026: Recruit participants and mentors; establish peer and senior mentor pairings
- Late June–July 2026: Mentoring program commences
- Early August 2026: Residential writing retreat held
- Late August 2026: Promotion applications submitted; participant feedback collected
- December 2026: Project report submitted

Sector Review

Women remain under-represented at senior academic levels in Australian universities, a pattern that has persisted despite decades of gender equity initiatives. Research on Australian universities documents a wide range of structural, organizational, and individual barriers to women's promotion, including excessive workloads, heavier service and teaching loads relative to men, limited research time, lack of informal networks and sponsorship, and the compounding effects of caring responsibilities¹. A review of Australian academic women and promotion found that structural roots of inequity have largely eluded contemporary gender equity initiatives, with women in competitive academic environments frequently overlooked despite aspiring to promotion². Importantly, the literature consistently identifies that the focus of effective interventions should be on fixing the organisation, not fixing the women³.

Peer mentoring has emerged as an evidence-based strategy for improving outcomes for women in academic settings. A facilitated peer mentoring program for women faculty in academic medicine, structured around shared values and interests with senior facilitators, produced strong outcomes in academic productivity and career satisfaction over a 12-month period⁴. Research in STEM contexts similarly demonstrates that women assigned a female peer mentor experienced greater belonging, motivation and confidence, with benefits persisting beyond the active mentoring period⁵.

The combined model proposed here including peer-to-peer mentoring, senior-junior mentoring, and a residential writing retreat reflects best practice by addressing both the relational and practical dimensions of the promotion barrier. Research on gender equity in Australian universities emphasises that multiple complementary strategies, supported by male allies and targeting both cultural and structural change, are needed to increase the representation of women in senior roles⁶. This project takes precisely that approach, building a program already

tested and proven within CSE.

References

1. Francis, L., & Stulz, V. 2020. Barriers and facilitators for women academics seeking promotion: Perspectives from the inside. *Australian Universities Review*, 62(2).
<https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.398503374925575>
2. Barclay, K., Moore, V., Papadelos, P., & Black, P. 2026. Australian academic women and promotion since 1975: patriarchal equilibrium? *Women's History Review*, 35(3), 391–416.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2025.2524990>
3. Burkinshaw, P., & White, K. 2017. Fixing the Women or Fixing Universities: Women in HE Leadership. *Administrative Sciences*, 7(3), 30. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci7030030>
4. Varkey, P., Jatoi, A., Williams, A., Mayer, A., Ko, M., Files, J., Blair, J., & Hayes, S. 2012. The positive impact of a facilitated peer mentoring program on academic skills of women faculty. *BMC Medical Education*, 12, 14.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6920-12-14>
5. Dennehy, T.C., & Dasgupta, N. 2017. Female peer mentors early in college increase women's positive academic experiences and retention in engineering. *PNAS*, 114(23). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1613117114>
6. Crimmins, G., Marshall, E., & Read, G. J. M. 2024. Gender quotas are not enough: the need for multiple strategies to address gender equity in Australian universities. *Gender and Education*, 36(6), 581–598.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2024.2370270>

Project Team

Professor Amy Diedrich is Director of the Centre for Sustainable Tropical Fisheries and Aquaculture (CSTFA) at James Cook University and a well-established leader in her field. A champion of researcher development and equity, Amy has been instrumental in designing innovative support structures within CSE, including the residential-style promotion retreat and the peer-to-peer mentoring program — both of which she proposed and brought to life. Her commitment to fostering an inclusive academic culture is further reflected in her service on CSE's EDIB Committee since 2025.

Professor Alana Grech is Academic Head of Earth and Environmental Sciences within CSE. As former Assistant Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, she led one of Australia's most prominent research centres and championed a wide range of equity, diversity, inclusion and development programs throughout her tenure. Alana also leads CSE's senior-junior mentoring program, and brings extensive experience in research leadership and institutional governance to her EDIB work.

Professor Yvette Everingham is Director of the JCU Centre for Agricultural Technology (AgTech) and the JCU academic rep on the Unisuper Consultative Committee who is acutely aware of the gender imbalance in superannuation. She is also a valued contributor to equity and inclusion efforts within CSE. Yvette has shaped JCU's academic culture through many years of service on JCU's promotion selection panels, giving her a uniquely practical perspective — she understands what panels look for, where candidates fall short, and how systemic barriers can disadvantage underrepresented academics. This insider knowledge will be invaluable in helping program participants navigate promotion with confidence.