

Name of Project: Perceptions of Academic Value, Recognition and Inclusion Among Recently Promoted Women Professors and Associate Professors at JCU

Chief Investigator: Dr Jaimee Hamilton

College: Pathways

Funding: \$5,000

Relevance of Project to JCU's Gender Equity Priorities

This project investigates how women academics at James Cook University who have been promoted to Associate Professor or Professor within the past four years perceive their academic value and recognition in comparison to their male counterparts. The research emerged from conversations with newly promoted women academics who described experiences of exclusion, inconsistent professional recognition, unequal use of formal academic titles, and diminished regard for their expertise and contributions within university settings.

Aligned with JCU's commitment to advancing gender equity and empowering its people, this project will examine how institutional culture, communication practices, and unconscious bias may shape staff experiences following promotion. By prioritising the voices and lived experiences of women academics, the research seeks to identify areas where gaps may exist between institutional policy and everyday workplace realities.

The project aims to contribute to advancing professional and academic practice through evidence-informed recommendations for practical improvements to current university programs, initiatives, and practices. Importantly, the research will generate qualitative insights that support a more inclusive and equitable academic culture for female, trans, and non-binary staff, ensuring their expertise, leadership, and scholarly contributions are appropriately recognised and valued across the institution.

Objectives

The project has four key objectives:

1. To explore how recently promoted women academics perceive their professional value and recognition within the university environment.
2. To examine experiences of inclusion, authority, collegial respect, and leadership visibility following promotion.
3. To identify structural, cultural, and interpersonal factors that support or hinder women's experiences of professional recognition at senior academic levels.
4. To develop recommendations that may contribute to strengthening inclusive academic cultures and advancing gender equity across the institution.

This project seeks to investigate how women academics at James Cook University who have been promoted to Associate Professor or Professor within the past four years perceive their academic value, professional recognition, and inclusion in comparison to their male counterparts. While universities increasingly emphasise gender equity and inclusive leadership, research demonstrates (Ullman, Gray, Blaise and Hobby, 2025; Martin, 2025) that women in academia continue to experience disparities in recognition, visibility, authority, and workplace inclusion, even after achieving senior academic promotion. This project aims to explore how these disparities may continue to shape professional experiences within contemporary university environments.

The project emerged from conversations with newly promoted women academics who reflected on experiences of exclusion, inconsistent use of formal academic titles, reduced

acknowledgement of expertise, and workplace interactions in which their perspectives were perceived as carrying less authority than those of male colleagues. These experiences suggest that promotion alone may not resolve broader cultural and structural inequities within academic institutions. The research therefore seeks to examine how senior women academics experience professional recognition and institutional belonging following promotion, and whether implicit bias, communication practices, or organisational culture continue to influence perceptions of academic value.

Using a qualitative research design, the project will involve an anonymous online survey and yarning-style conversations with women academics who have recently been promoted to Associate Professor or Professor. Participants will be invited to reflect on their experiences of professional recognition, collegial interactions, leadership visibility, workplace culture, and perceptions of respect and authority following promotion. The study will adopt a strengths-based and reflective approach, creating a culturally safe and supportive environment in which participants can share their experiences openly. Data will be analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and opportunities for institutional improvement.

The anticipated outcomes of the project include the development of evidence-informed recommendations that may strengthen equity and inclusion initiatives across the university. Findings may inform professional development programs, leadership training, communication practices, mentoring initiatives, and institutional policy review processes. Importantly, the project seeks to support the creation of a more equitable academic culture in which the expertise and leadership of female, trans, and non-binary academics are consistently recognised and respected.

By contributing qualitative evidence grounded in staff experience, this research aims to advance professional and academic practice through practical recommendations for improving current university programs, initiatives, and workplace culture. Ultimately, the project seeks to support a more inclusive and respectful higher education environment in which all academics are valued equally for their contributions, expertise, and leadership.

Milestones

Timeframe	Milestone
June 2026	Submission of Human Research Ethics Application
July 2026	Ethics approval and development of recruitment materials
August 2026	Participant recruitment commences
August–October 2026	Conduct yarning conversations and administer survey
November–December 2026	Data cleaning, coding and thematic analysis
January–February 2027	Development of findings and recommendations
March 2027	Final report and dissemination of outcomes

Sector Review

Discussion of gender pay and workforce-composition parity in Australian universities (Science in Australia Gender Equity, 2026; Ross 2026) often cannot distinguish between senior academic leadership (Levels D and E) and senior professional leadership positions, as well as the specific composition of roles (being research-only or research-and-teaching positions). Research in this area in Australian universities (Future Campus, 2026; Campus Morning Mail, 2026; Ross, 2026) and UK universities (Matthews, 2026) highlight that while the proportion of women employed in senior academic leadership has been increasing, the rates of promotion of women lags.

Many of these studies focus on quantitative data—role description, proportion of workforce and pay. However, influencing this data are the individual and collective lived experiences of women, which contribute to the attraction and retention of women directly to, or progressing to, senior academic leadership levels, and the direct and indirect support for promotion application. In Australia, recent research on the experiences of women in, or seeking promotion to, senior academic leadership roles is limited (Lesch, Scharfenkamp, and Wicker, 2023; Pyke, 2013; Francis and Stulz, 2020; Donmanige, Almeida, Frino, and Middleton, 2026; Lipton, 2020; Thomas, Thomas, and Smith, 2019), although supported by extensive research on the influence of legislation, university policy, and gender equity strategies (see, for example, Barclay, Moore, Papadelos, and Black, 2025 and Winchester and Browning, 2015, and references therein). This existing research provides important accounts of the experiences of women in Australian universities, which will both help inform the present study methodology and provide context for the different experiences of recently promoted women at JCU.

Project Team

The project team will be comprised of Dr Jaimee Hamilton and Dr Madalyn Casey. If the application is successful, we propose hiring a casual Research Assistant to assist with recruitment and complete data collection under the supervision of Dr Hamilton.

Dr Jaimee Hamilton's expertise lies in Aboriginal social theory, Aboriginal pedagogies and philosophies, pathways education, hyflex teaching, cultural intelligence, the creation of culturally inclusive spaces, and the ethical use of AI. Dr Hamilton is experienced in qualitative research and framework development.

Dr Madalyn Casey is a physicist with experience in both quantitative research and data analysis, and qualitative social research. Dr Casey teaches into pathways education and early-degree subjects in STEM fields.

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