Report on GEAR Forums for Women - August/September 2026

GEAR Forums provide an opportunity for the GEAR Team to update women in the JCU community on JCU's actions towards gender equity, and to provide a safe area where women are welcome to raise and discuss equity issues that are important to them and share their views and experiences.

GEAR Forums are confidential, with this de-identified report summarising the issues discussed across the Forums.

GEAR Forum reports are used to inform the ongoing work of JCU in achieving gender equity.

On the 31st of August and 3rd of September 2026, 44 women registered to attend a GEAR Forum hosted by GEAR Secretariate, Gerry Polovich, Associate Professor Connar McShane and Associate Professor Megan Higgie.

Out of the 44 women who registered for the Forum, the majority of registrations came from women employed in ongoing positions 86.4% and 13.6% fixed term. 84.1% were full-time, 15.9% part-time. 47.7% were Academic staff and 52.3% were Professional and Technical staff. 43.2% had attended a previous forum and 56.8% had not previously attended a forum.

The forums began with an update on gender equality activities in 2026, and on the activities of the GEAR Team. There was then opportunity for open discussion on matters women wanted to raise.

A summary is outlined below.

WGEA Reporting

Australian organisations with more than 500 employees must report annually to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) on their compliance with the Workplace Gender Equality Act.

JCU's **2025-2026 Annual Report** was submitted in April. This Report and previous year's reports can be found on HR's Staff Equity and Diversity/Workplace Gender Equality Reporting page.

Areas covered in Report are:

- Workforce composition
- Board/Governing Body
- Equal Renumeration and Gender Pay Gap
- Flexible Work and Employee Support
- Employee Consultation

Staff may provide feedback on JCU's annual report directly to JCU or WGEA.

The WGEA Employer Data Explorer is an interactive dashboard that allows users to view JCU's results for a selected year and compare them with other organisations, including universities of a similar size.

JCU's workforce composition is broadly similar to that of comparable universities, with women forming the majority of employees and differing levels of representation across pay quartiles.

WGEA Targets for 2026–2028

From 2026, each reporting organisation was required to select three targets to pursue over the following three years. JCU selected the following:

- Increase the representation of women in senior management roles.
- Reduce the median remuneration gender pay gap for managers, including line managers and more senior roles.
- Strengthen policies and practices that support equal remuneration and gender pay equity, including remuneration review processes and management accountability.

These targets align with a key principle reflected in WGEA guidance and JCU's gender equity work: addressing gender inequality requires changing systems rather than expecting women to adapt to inequitable structures.

JCU's 2026 Gender Pay Gap

The agency uses common questions across all Australian industries, although higher education differs from many corporate settings. Universities may also interpret categories, such as "manager", differently.

Full analyses are available on the Gender Equity at JCU webpage/Workplace Gender Equality Reporting.

The gender pay gap is the difference between the average or median pay of men and women, expressed as a percentage of men's pay.

JCU's gender pay gap expanded from 2025 to 2026. Among academic staff, the average gap increased from 10% to 12%. The average academic salary was approximately $165,000 for men and $148,000 for women, a difference of about $17,000. The gap for professional and technical staff was smaller but also widened over the same period.

The main drivers of the academic pay gap are:

- **Underrepresentation of women at senior academic levels:** JCU had 54 male professors and 24 female professors in 2026, compared with 52 men and 27 women in 2025.
- **Concentration of women at Level B:** Women substantially outnumber men at this level, with many clustered near its upper salary point and not progressing to Level C and above.
- **Market loadings:** These discretionary payments, used in recruitment or retention, are awarded more often to men and at higher average rates. Their contribution to the pay gap doubled between 2025 and 2026, although senior-level workforce composition remains the larger driver.

These findings reinforce the importance of balanced promotion pathways and retaining women in senior roles.

Areas Requiring Further Analysis

A current Gender Equity Project will use HR data to track progression through academic levels by gender and, where possible, by work profile, including teaching specialist, research specialist, and teaching-and-research roles.

The analysis will examine whether progression rates differ across profiles and identify where staff are most likely to stall. Existing data already show clustering at the top of several levels. Line managers should therefore speak proactively with all staff at the top of their level to ensure they receive appropriate support to prepare for promotion.

Rope Overview

ROPE, or **Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence**, assesses performance in light of a person's role, workload, opportunities, and available time. It asks what the person was employed to do, how their time was allocated, and what they achieved in that context.

When to Use ROPE

A ROPE statement should accompany performance-based applications, including job, grant, promotion, and Special Studies Program or sabbatical applications.

What to Include

A strong ROPE statement should briefly cover:

Role and workload: roles held and full-time-equivalent allocation during the assessment period.

Time available: average time allocated to teaching, research, and service, excluding extended leave periods.

Performance evidence: relevant qualitative and quantitative evidence, such as publications, citations, teaching outcomes, awards, or research degree completions.

Where useful, evidence can be prorated against a common workload profile so assessors can judge performance relative to opportunity.

Why ROPE Matters

ROPE supports fairer assessment by aligning achievements with actual workload, opportunity, and circumstances. This is important because staff with the same classification may have very different teaching, research, and service allocations.

ROPE for Everyone

ROPE should not be limited to exceptional circumstances such as part-time work, leave, caring responsibilities, or illness. Every staff member has a distinct workload and opportunity profile, so all applicants can benefit from explaining their performance in context.

This broader approach is supported by GEAR, the Vice-Chancellor, and the Chair of Academic Board.

While University-wide ROPE resources are being developed, please contact Associate Professor Megan Higgie: megan.higgie@jcu.edu.au for further information.

VC Gender Equity Project Fund 2025

The VC's Gender Equity Project Fund provides $30,000 in financial support for between one and six projects, depending on the quality and number of applications received. In 2025, two projects were funded.

Making the Invisible Visible How Service & Engagement is Understood, Classified, Valued, and Assessed in the College of Science & Engineering. Led by Megan Higgie, Allison Paley, Helena Radke, Connar McShane, and Maddie Green.

This project examined how service and engagement are understood, valued, and distributed across women and men in the College of Science and Engineering. It found these activities were poorly defined and inconsistently recognised, potentially disadvantaging women whose contributions are less visible. The report recommended a shared institutional definition, relative-to-opportunity assessment in PDP and promotion, recognition of high-effort lower-profile service, further university-wide analysis, and better resourcing for engagement.

Final Report and Recommendations

Gender Equity in HDR Confirmation of Candidature Milestones project. Led by Associate Professor Connar McShane and Dr. Sophie Walker (was a HDR student at the time).

This project examined observed inequities in how female and male HDR students were treated during Confirmation of Candidature question-and-answer sessions. The team reviewed recorded College of Science and Engineering sessions and analysed treatment patterns, including whether these varied by the presenting gender of the questioner. As a small-scale study, the findings suggested possible inequities and recommended further research, clearer recording and monitoring processes, stronger chair responsibilities, and independent academic involvement in moderation. Final Report and Recommendations

VC Gender Equity Project Fund 2026

The Ascent Program: Supporting Women's promotion in STEM via mentoring and a writing retreat. Professor Amy Diedrich; Professor Alana Grech; Professor Yvette Everingham

This project funds a 2-day writing retreat as part of the broader Ascent Program that covers peer to peer and, senior to junior mentoring. The report on the project will provide evidence-based insights into how the program supports participants, what factors are important to make it sustainable, and potentially considerations for other Colleges to adopt/adapt. It will also make observations, where possible, on how the Ascent program fits with other promotion-supportive activities that are on offer.

Promotions Resources. Dr Dongmei Li, Dr Lisa Simmons, Dr Amanda Krause, Dr Jenny Panchal, Ms Karen Knight, Dr Sam Teague, Dr Liza Van Eijk, Dr Harini Priya Mani

This project is looking at resources that can usefully support promotion, for example, narrative exemplars, reflective prompts and peer feedback guides. The project team is made up of women who have participated in the 'From Leading Academic to Academic Leader' Program in 2026.

Fixing the Leaky Pipeline Policy Tool. A/Prof Martijn van de Pol and A/Prof Megan Higgie

This project will look to develop a data dashboard to monitoring hiring, attrition and promotion across academic levels, work profiles (balance, teaching and research only and research specialist) and contract type and an interactive modelling policy tool to support succession planning by enabling managers to test long term impacts of policy levers, such as equitable hiring and promotion interventions.

Perceptions of Academic Value, Recognition and Inclusion Among Recently Promoted Women Professors. Dr Jaimee Hamilton and Dr Madalyn Casey

This project looks at experiences of women promoted to Level D & E in the last four years to understand how they perceive their academic value, professional recognition and inclusion. The qualitative project will include a survey and yarning circles.

Participants' Discussions Over Both Forums

- **Work Culture and Meeting Accessibility:** Participants discussed the continuing failure to consistently schedule important meetings within workable hours (2:30pm onwards) and the resulting effects on carers' (predominately women) participation, credibility, and trust in gender-equity commitments.
- **Market Loadings and Gender Pay Gaps:** A case seeking market loadings can focus on duties already performed above the substantive classification, particularly where those responsibilities will continue.
- **HR Data Access:** Participants expressed interest in whether HR data could identify pay gap differences and market loadings by college. They noted that accessible data would provide useful insight into areas where JCU is improving and where further measures may be required.
- **Academic Leader Programs/Training**
  The need for more programs that are cross-campus accessible. Staff valued the Leading Academic to Academic Leader Program but raised access barriers for Cairns-based academics, including travel, teaching release, and approval requirements.
- **Promotion Barriers**
  Women often apply for promotion only when highly confident of success, whereas men may apply with less certainty. Similar patterns occur in job applications and other competitive processes.

  The two-year wait before reapplying after an unsuccessful promotion application may further discourage applications, particularly among women and staff with diverse or intersectional identities.
- **JCU Support Initiatives**
  Support initiatives remain valuable. Mentoring can help, while peer networks may be especially effective in providing dedicated time, encouragement, and accountability for people preparing promotion materials. Several projects funded through the Vice-Chancellor's Gender Equity Project Fund provide this type of support.

Follow-up Actions: Raise at GEAR Meetings

- **Promotion Panel Practices:** Raise with GEAR the need for consistent, transparent promotion-panel recruitment, panel-member profile information, relevant lived experience, and appropriate assessor training, including review of whether unconscious-bias training is effective.

- **GEAR Initiative Follow-Up:** Add regular status and effectiveness checks for previously raised gender-equity initiatives, including scheduling important meetings within workable hours for staff with caring responsibilities.
- **Promotion Peer Support:** Raise at the next GEAR meeting the creation of a confidential, university-wide promotion for community practice or peer-matching network for staff seeking promotion, and recently promoted staff.

This report has been prepared by GEAR Secretariat: Gerry Polovich, JCU Respect Program Officer, Office of the Vice Chancellor. E: gear@jcu.edu.au
https://www.jcu.edu.au/gender-equity-at-jcu