Gender Equity Action and Research Team

Report on GEAR Forums – 6 April 2021

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 space where women are welcome to raise and discuss equity issues that are important to them, and share their views and experiences. Forums are scheduled quarterly during 2021. GEAR Forums are confidential, with the GEAR Coordinators producing a de-identified report that summarises the kinds of issues discussed across the Forums. GEAR Forum reports are used to inform the ongoing work of JCU in achieving gender equity.

On the 6th of April, over 80 JCU women joined two GEAR Forums, with many more expressing interest. Each Forum began with a brief update on the actions currently in progress, and then broke up into smaller breakout groups to talk through whatever issues women wanted to raise. Below we give a brief summary of the discussion at the Forum.

Remote Work, Flexible Work, and Part-Time Work
- Some women noted the positive effects of increased remote work in the wake of COVID-19, including less time off for caring responsibilities; more equitable sharing of caring work in families, allowing women to take on more hours; and women who work part-time no longer missing out on informal socializing which often happens late in the day.
- There was concern about the positive effects only being short-lived and that a return to campus will mean these benefits disappear and things return to pre-COVID ways of working.
- The negatives of the new way of working that were raised include difficulty switching off from work; the challenges of external teaching that hasn't been centrally timetabled; increased expectations to teach outside normal business hours; and a lack of individual responsiveness in favour of a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Women reported mixed experiences of returning to work from parental leave with some flexibility only being offered in theory not practice, and inability to achieve workable solutions for breastfeeding/expressing milk, particularly in open plan workspaces.
- The new policy on Remote Work was discussed but there has been low uptake because there is a fear that it will restrict existing flexibility. Some women have already reported a difficult transition back to working on campus and a loss of flexibility that had improved working conditions.
- Genuine engagement with remote, flexible, and part-time work requires careful consideration to what work must be done in a more traditional way, without the old expectations that staff must be in their office full-time in order to be productive. While some roles require presence, some are task-focused.

Recruitment
- Several suggestions for improving recruitment practices were made by women. For example, positions should be advertised in such a way that makes clear whether they can accommodate flexible or remote work, or could be taken up part-time – with hiring managers accountable for justifying why the work can't be done flexibly, remotely, or part-time in those cases.
- While achievement relative to opportunity is explicitly considered in promotion, it is not currently included in the recruitment process, and this might address some issues of women applicants perceived to be less competitive than men. Further, the process that a Selection Panel goes through might be amended to prompt them to consider gender balance of their shortlist early in the process.
- To improve the recruitment of women in areas where they are underrepresented, leaders should consider, for example, loadings for particular appointments.
- Women suggested that all panel members and Chairpersons should be monitored to ensure they have completed the gender training prior to participating in recruitment and should they not undertake the training they should not be permitted on panels.
- When women are appointed, they highlighted the importance of being able to select their chosen name in university records.

Career Progression

- Women in the forums noted that in some parts of the University, even where women make up the majority of staff, they can be underrepresented in management and leadership roles.
- Academic promotion is still considered onerous and challenging, with women reporting that they lack confidence to go for promotion without direct encouragement from line managers. In particular, women with non-traditional careers (time off work or periods of part-time work, or careers that haven't focused on research) find the promotion process is more work to explain and justify their career trajectory.
- Women suggested that more clarity on how the promotion panel is trained, and how their deliberations progress, might remove some of the barriers.
- The common assumption that career progression is based on *merit* was strongly challenged, in particular because common understandings of merit are based on gendered stereotypes and are slow to change.
- There was concern about how ADR or Head positions are filled as these are often not advertised. The feeling is that these are not equally allocated to men and women and women would like to see a transparent process to appoint these roles.
- In relation to 'pipeline' opportunities or managing an internal talent pool for development and promotion opportunities women would like this to be a University-wide program as opposed to just within specific Colleges to ensure that women in specialist research areas can be pipelined for continuing roles within the Academy.
- Professional & Technical staff do not have a formal promotion process and many rely on internal mobility for career progression – and they suggested improving that process, for example by training managers to give better feedback to internal applicants for positions.
- Other opportunities for career development for Professional & Technical staff include joining groups or committees, like the GEAR team. Managers should consider who in their teams might benefit the most from such skills development and encourage them to participate.
- Women noted particular challenges facing casual staff. In particular, they accrue superannuation at a lower rate, leading to unequal retirement outcomes. In terms of career progression, women noted that we sometimes lose high quality casual staff who are able to find job security outside of JCU.

Leadership, Mentoring, and Role Modelling

- Women noted some positive examples of internal role modelling, such as senior leaders talking publicly about flexible work and caring responsibilities to normalize it in their area. Some women wanted more of this from their managers, and suggested training for senior staff in running inclusive meetings, communicating with staff teams, enabling robust conversation, ensuring consistency between policy and practice, and more broadly in equity & inclusion.
- Internal mentoring and shadowing were identified as central to career development, especially for Professional & Technical staff.
- Women wanted to hear more from their managers about how they are operationalizing the SAGE Athena SWAN Bronze Award Action Plan.

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