
The University of Sydney submission in response to the Australian Research Council's *Increasing the diversity of Australia's research workforce; a pathway to gender equality in ARC grant funding processes, December 2019*

ARC Proposal 1

To improve women's participation, the ARC proposes a specific target of 50 per cent of Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) applications from women by 2023 (for the round commencing funding in 2024) with an interim target of 45 per cent by 2021 (for the round commencing funding in 2022). The requirement that at least 50 per cent of applications be from women will be implemented at an institutional level, rather than for individual disciplines.

University responses

1. Should the ARC introduce a requirement to have 50 per cent of DECRA applications from women?

No, however, the University of Sydney does support the introduction of an alternative DECRA application target for 2023 – 40%(male)/40%(female)/20%(other), where the '20% other' can be male, female or gender x.

Explanation

The University of Sydney strongly supports Minister Tehan's and the ARC's commitment to improve women's participation in ARC-funded research. The ARC's three proposals align with University strategies to recruit and retain academic women, particularly in the STEMM areas; our commitment to the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) process and the Athena SWAN principles. We promoted the ARC's survey throughout the University, encouraging interested staff to respond directly to the ARC and provide input towards the development of the University's positions regarding each of the ARC's three proposals.

The main reason we do not support the ARC's proposal to introduce a 50% female institutional application requirement for the DECRA program is that a binary 50/50 male/female target does not account for staff of other genders. We recommended that a more appropriate target would be 40%(male)/40%(female)/20%(other), where the '20% other' can be male, female or gender X. Administering Organisations may aspire to reach 50% female applicants for DECRA, but a 40/40/20 target is more reasonable, allows for minor fluctuations at the time of submission and recognises that gender is not binary.

2. Please outline any impacts or perverse outcomes you foresee resulting from the initiative.

Various potential perverse outcomes have been raised by the individual members of our staff and internal representative groups who have shared their thoughts with us. The key themes emerging from our internal consultations about this ARC proposal are summarised below.

The primary focus and overarching principle should be to encourage and enable female academics in Australia to submit the best quality application and not to focus solely on meeting gender-based application targets. There are alternative approaches to hard application targets that would be more practical in assisting women in academia.

One respondent commented that imposition of a 50% female DECRA application requirement is more likely to be problematic for smaller Administering Organisations because of the usual effects of small numbers.

Numerous respondents noted that introducing a 50% female institutional application target for the DECRA program was out of step with broad community acceptance that gender is not binary and that a substantial minority of people identify as neither male nor female. Any application and participation targets adopted by the ARC will therefore need to reflect and accommodate this reality.

The University of Sydney Early and Mid-Career Academic Network (SEMCAN) expressed concern that placing the 50% target at the institutional level may entrench representation issues at the faculty/school level, by causing the University to shift investment in the development of DECRA applications away from disciplines in which women's success in the scheme is low to disciplines in which women already perform well.

Some individual respondents believe that setting a hard, institutional gender application target for the DECRA program, could lead to the University having to restrict the number of male applicants it puts forward. This was not viewed as a fair outcome and concerns were raised about how the University and other Administering Organisations would make such decisions and implement them administratively.

Others argued that some Administering Organisations could meet the 50% target by increasing the numbers of female applicants at a faster rate than males. In response, however, concerns were expressed that in the absence of growth funding for the DECRA program, increasing applicant numbers overall would further reduce success rates and inevitably lead to wasted time and resources for more applicants, administering organisations, the ARC and its assessment panels.

A respondent thought the proposal risked some Administering Organisations putting female applicants forward for the DECRA program before they were ready, thereby wasting their time and the time of assessors and possibly preventing applicants from eventually being successful – given the given the cap of two DECRA applications per person. The same respondent argued that a 50% institution-level target may fail to address the actual problem of women's underrepresentation in STEM disciplines, because it will be masked by overrepresentation in other fields. By implying that the overrepresentation of men in one field can be compensated by the overrepresentation of women in another, the proposal may hinder the identification (and therefore correction) of the causes of gender imbalances in the Australian research system. This would also disproportionately affect universities that are STEM heavy, as those with stronger medical/education/social sciences profiles will more easily meet the 50% target given the greater proportion of women in those fields.

Various University respondents raised concerns that the setting of such a target was a simplistic, piecemeal and blunt approach to a complex problem. Some argued the measure was unlikely to contribute effectively to increasing the number of women remaining in the research sector and progressing to more senior roles, unless it formed part of an integrated holistic strategy agreed between the ARC and Administering Organisations. As two University respondents wrote:

“Will the requirement for 50% women DECRA applications translate to greater than the current success DECRA funding for women? Potentially not. Even if it does, how might this translate into greater STEM retention and promotion? Based on the data provided the funding area to target 50% application rate and success is the Discovery Project grants. This is a major source of funding for research, and successful DP funding is a significant factor in career progression, yet the 28.7% participation rate and the even lower success rate of 22.8% seems to mirror the lack of women at Associate and Full Professor levels. The proposal seems to be light touch and I am not convinced the proposal will have a positive outcome.”

“My view is that the ARC should focus on equality of opportunity, not on equality of outcome. In fact, I think it is doing well—women enjoy much higher success rates in almost all ARC schemes, which suggests that the ARC is recognising and correcting for the structural biases that women have to overcome, thus helping to create a substantively equitable selection process. Understanding and correcting the structural issues facing women is difficult and requires careful analysis, not a sledgehammer approach.”

3. Do you have alternative proposals for mechanisms open to the ARC to increase the support for women in early career research?

Please include the argument for your proposal and suggestions for implementation.

Alternative proposal: That the ARC adopts an institutional DECRA application target of 40%(male)/40%(female)/20%(other) by 2023 instead of the proposed 50/50 binary male/female split, where the '20% other' can be male, female or gender x.

Rationale: A 40/40/20 target is more reasonable, allows for minor fluctuations at time of submission and recognises that gender is not binary. Administering Organisations may aspire to reach 50% female applicants or even higher proportions.

Complementary additional proposal 1: The ARC should apply a more holistic approach to achieving gender equity across its full suite of programs, not simply focus on the DECRA program.

Rationale: It is difficult to see how the ARC and sector will achieve equity within the next few years unless there is some positive action in funding across the grant portfolio, rather than just targeting the early career application process. Application (and potentially gender-based successful funding outcome) targets could be set for other grants, particularly the Discovery Projects.

Complementary additional proposal 2: Depoliticise and make certain the timing of the announcement of ARC grant outcomes.

Rationale: The recent politicisation of grant outcome announcements and almost year-long delays have a negative effect on early-career researchers, and women disproportionately so. The ARC should announce outcomes on a date fixed in the grant guidelines, no later than six months after the submission deadline.

Complementary additional proposal 3: Increase the overall funding envelope to make more opportunities for everyone.

Rationale: The limited and declining funding available through ARC schemes are the biggest barriers to participation in ARC processes. Current and projected funding settings for ARC programs are putting pressure on research funding, which will further exacerbate the current trends. Imposing a 50% institutional gender target for DECRA risks further reducing success rates, unless Administering Organisations reduce total applications submitted.

ARC Proposal 2

Women currently comprise 44 per cent of the ARC College of Experts but the distribution is uneven depending on discipline. The ARC proposes a target of equal representation of men and women on the College of Experts by 2023 and the Selection Advisory Committees by 2025.

University responses

4. Should the ARC increase the representation of women to 50 per cent on the ARC College of Experts and Selection Advisory Committees by establishing a target?

No, however, the University of Sydney does support the introduction of an alternative target for the ARC College of Experts 2023 – 40%(male)/40%(female)/20%(other), where the '20% other' can be male, female or gender x.

Explanation

The goal of increasing women's share of on CoEs is not solely related to increasing women's success rates. Equality of representation is important independently of outcomes as it will increase the diversity of topics being successful even if it does not increase women's success rate.

Noting that it is common practice for company boards to have a minimum quota or target of 40% for either gender, aiming for a 40/40/20 target would be most sensible. This gives some leeway in terms of expectations on women's time, allows for minor fluctuations at the time of submission and recognises that gender is not binary. It would, however, certainly make the academic workforce take gender equality more seriously.

5. Please outline any impacts or perverse outcomes you foresee resulting from the initiative.

One individual University respondent provided the following feedback:

"If the College of Experts is composed of 50% women by 2023, but women at Associate Professor and Professor (who are the majority of members of the CoE) level are less than 50%, then the women on the College of Experts will be contributing proportionately more to this ARC administration than their male colleagues. This would lead to the relatively small number of senior women in Australian academia

having a disproportionate service load, with the effect even more pronounced in disciplines in which women are more under-represented. It is well known that women are often required to do more teaching and service work, at the cost of their own research. Such a proposal would further entrench this inequality. The responsibility for improving the behaviour of Assessors and the ARC College of Experts toward female applicants (if such improvement is needed) should not fall only on women. If quotas are to be mandated they should be quotas which do not give more thankless tasks to women.”

One way of dealing with this issue would be to ask female CoE nominees to explain how their institutions will help them balance the service loads female CoE. This would help ensure that Administering Organisations address the issue proactively and should result in more male staff members contributing to lower-value service work for their Administering Organisations.

6. Do you have alternative proposals for mechanisms available to the ARC to improve the representation of women in ARC assessment processes?

Please include the argument for your proposal and suggestions for implementation.

The ARC should continue working with Administering Organisations on comprehensive long-term strategies to increase the number and proportion of female and gender X academics who are promoted to Associate Professor and Full Professor.

In addition to taking steps to further encourage Administering Organisations to recognise female CoE contributions in their institutional service functions, the ARC should consider rewarding academics for participating (e.g., by counting this role toward promotion, or giving participants additional recognition at the Institutional level). The ARC could provide a stipend to support backfill or childcare support or offer travel provisions for additional childcare support during remote panel participation.

ARC Proposal 3

The ARC provides annual statistics to each eligible organisation on its participation and success rate by gender across the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP), compared to the results for all universities and their relevant cohort (if applicable). The ARC proposes to publish statistics on participation and success by gender for all eligible organisations on its website.

University responses

7. Should the ARC publish data on institutional performance (applications by gender) on its website?

Yes.

8. Please outline any impacts or perverse outcomes you foresee resulting from the initiative.

We fully support the proposal for the ARC to publish consolidated data showing the gender breakdown of Administering Organisations' applications by funding scheme. The better informed all ARC participants applicants – referees, CoE members and Administering Organisations are – the more likely they are to take gender equity seriously.

The presentation of the data should include applicants who are gender x but great care will need to be taken to remove the risk of accidentally revealing an applicant as being gender x without the person's consent.

The website should provide an optional opportunity for each Administering Organisation to provide a web link to information about its gender diversity strategies and policies.

The website could also usefully indicate those Administering Organisations that have committed to initiatives such as Athena Swan and/or received awards through such programs.

9. Do you have alternative proposals for mechanisms available to the ARC to provide incentives to eligible institutions to promote themselves to women as employers of choice?

Please include the argument for your proposal and suggestions for implementation.

- The ARC's setting of gender application targets for Administering Organisations for the DECRA scheme should form part of an integrated and evidence based long-term strategy, developed in partnership with the NHMRC and Administering Organisations, to address the structural issues within the Australian education and research system that lead to women being underrepresented across the ARC grant schemes, particularly in STEM disciplines.
- The ARC should consider establishing and promoting an annual award for Administering Organisations demonstrating outstanding commitments to gender equity and diversity amongst their research and research support staff.
- The ARC should consider developing a policy that ensures post-graduate scholarships attached to ARC awards are distributed evenly to men and women.
- We note that ministerial delays cause career uncertainty, which affects all University researchers, but particularly female applicants. The ARC should not shy away from making a case for ministerial expediency on the basis of increasing women's participation in the research workforce. In the event of being funded, the timeliness of the funding announcement is important to women returning to work who are trying to secure childcare places. Places at childcare centres are generally under review at the end of a calendar year when older children move out of care to school.

10. Do you have alternative proposals for mechanisms available to the ARC to increase women's participation and retention in the research workforce?

Please include the argument for your proposal and suggestions for implementation.

We have covered aspects of this question in our responses to the various other questions and look forward to working with the ARC to develop evidence-based strategies to increase women's participation and retention in the Australian research workforce.

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