The *Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) Forum Workshop*, hosted by the Australian Academy of Science (AAS), brought together prominent leaders covering the full spectrum of Australia’s science and research sector. Policy makers, research funders and universities were in attendance to address the persistent issues regarding the underrepresentation of women in Australian science. Building on the success of the SAGE Forum Steering Committee meeting in July, the event was held in Australia’s capital Canberra with a view to developing an action plan to address gender inequality. Representatives from the UK’s Equality Challenge Unit were also in attendance to outline their experiences and provide information on how they are tackling the challenges in the country’s gender equity landscape, opening discussions on how similar initiatives could be developed for Australia...
Can you provide an overview of the key topics featured on the Workshop's agenda? Why were these specific subjects chosen?

The Workshop received reports from two key people at the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) in the UK – David Ruebain, CEO, and Sarah Dickinson, Manager of the Athena SWAN Charter. Workshop attendees had the opportunity to get information on and discuss how the Athena SWAN initiative is implemented and what its impact has been. Following these reports, Workshop attendees discussed major issues underlying gender equity in Australia, before providing feedback on recommended actions for the future.

The low representation of women in senior science positions reflects poorly on the sector and is garnering increasing attention. The discussion topics were chosen to draw out the consideration of subtle cultural factors influencing the gender landscape, which may not have received as much attention in the past and included:

- Employment practices discouraging women from staying in the scientific workforce
- Organisational expectations of ‘the ideal scientific researcher’
- What we value in researchers and metric-based measures for judgment
- Mobility
- Differences across STEM disciplines

How will the results from the event be utilised?

A principal outcome of the Workshop will be the establishment of the SAGE Forum with ‘Foundation Members’. The first actions of the Forum will be to conduct a pilot programme to launch this initiative. This pilot programme will inform longer-term future actions to be implemented by major employer organisations in the STEM sector within Australia.

Can you discuss the Charter and how it could prove beneficial to Australia?

Importantly, the Workshop provided the opportunity for engagement across the science sector on the establishment and operation of a SAGE Forum in Australia. Representatives from the UK ECU shared their expertise, and helped facilitate discussion to set up a comparable initiative in Australia.

The Athena SWAN Charter requires organisations to evaluate their own performance, and develop action plans specific to their circumstances. Athena SWAN awards – bronze, silver or gold – are made on the basis of how well organisations or departments support the progression of women. This Charter has impacted on organisational structure, cultural change, better representation of women and improved working practices. Using an awards or ranking system to identify the institutions that best support women will lead to the best people from around the world choosing to work at those institutions. In the future, the battle for the best talent will be won by the most supportive institutions.

How important is the SAGE Forum Workshop in addressing the main issues surrounding gender equality in Australia?

The Workshop is critical to address gender inequality in Australian science. The data on the progression of women have not changed in decades. The gender balance of appointments within universities at the early career stage is fairly even and has been for 20 or 30 years, yet women comprise only 17 per cent of associate professor and professor positions in universities and the rate of change has been glacial. Women are not progressing at the same rate as men, and they are leaving at higher rates than men. The sector needs to step up to the problem, own the issue, and develop a dramatic new approach to stem this waste of talent and investment.
Can you provide an insight into the project behind your presentation ‘The current gender equity landscape in Australia’?

This project came out of an earlier report that I compiled on women in science in Australia for the Federation of Australian Science and Technology Societies in 2009, which looked at the fundamental question of the status of women in science. We examined the data associated with the university sector as this holds the most robust and comprehensive data available.

Our current project is looking not just at the university sector but at two key research workforces: the biological and biomedical sciences, and the chemical sciences. We chose these disciplinary areas because they are areas where there are, and has been for several decades, large numbers of women participating at both the undergraduate and postgraduate research level. After this we see what looks like a falling off of the participation of women, and the ascendency of men in all levels of seniority and elite science in these fields.

You chaired the workshop entitled ‘Employment practices discouraging women from staying in the scientific workforce’. What are the central issues within this topic?

There has been a huge amount of literature concerning the socialisation of women, a large number of psychological studies on the relative assessment of women’s performance contribution and extensive work on organisational cultures as really critical factors to the success or otherwise of women. However, one of the issues that no one talks about is employment practices. Here in Australia we are seeing a significant increase in the casualisation of the academic workforce and also short- and fixed-term contracts for researchers associated with an increasingly competitive grants and funding environment. What would make a difference would be three-to-five year contracts rather than casual or shorter-term contracts but the reality is a very fractious set of employment opportunities, particularly for younger generations.

We have got some important structural issues to deal with around employment practices, but there are also other problems like cultural issues. The majority of our academic population works between 50 and 60 hours a week and many work over 70. In combination with that, women are disproportionately responsible for most household duties and caring responsibilities. So, across the board, women are carrying a much higher burden.

Can you elaborate on the insights you have gathered about women who leave or identify with having left scientific research?

In our survey we used a snowball technique to ask respondents from our industry partners to send the survey on to people who they knew had left the research workforce. We wanted to find out why people had left but we also wanted to find out whether they were – as our American colleagues have been saying – quitting science. What we discovered from our survey and a series of focus groups is that there is a significant population of people who leave the research and university workforce, but who move into fields where they may well still be using their scientific knowledge and skills at a high level. In focus groups in particular, we found that people go to extraordinary lengths to remain connected with science. A significant population are doing so, moving into communication, intellectual property, government and policy roles, as well as roles for people with expertise in science. We’re finding women don’t quit science, but cease to be visible in terms of their contribution to the scientific community and science endeavour. And we want to make those people visible.

In your view, what are the potential impacts of the Workshop on Australia’s future scientific landscape?

I strongly believe this Workshop will be a real game-changer for women in Australian science. This is history in the making! As a woman in science who has periodically struggled against the tide, it has been incredibly rewarding to contribute – even in a small way – to invigorating this conversation! For the young women PhD students in training today, I hope very much that it will be different for them. We live in potentially transformational times. It will be exciting to see what a national programme, which recognises research organisations that are actively revising and implementing sound policies/practices to allow their women in science to lead and excel, will do for the gender landscape of Australian science; but more importantly, what it will do for the actual science itself and our nation as a whole.
To what extent did the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) contribute to the SAGE Forum Workshop?

NHMRC CEO Professor Warwick Anderson and I gave a joint presentation on Council’s role in improving gender equity by ensuring that institutions are playing their part in supporting female researchers.

We do a lot to ensure NHMRC’s grant review mechanisms are fair and equitable, and that is a very important part of our role, but there is much more that can be done to support researchers beyond just the grant process.

Specifically, NHMRC is currently looking at revising its administering institution policy which could mean that in the future all institutions who want to administer NHMRC research funds will need to have adequate policies and practices in place.

Although NHMRC provides the funding for researchers, we are not their employers. Institutions have an important role to play to ensure that their female researchers are treated fairly and have access to the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

As Australia’s peak body for supporting health and medical research, in what ways will the NHMRC aim to utilise the results from the Workshop to improve gender equity in health and medical research?

Much of the focus of the Workshop was on the UK Athena SWAN model. NHMRC will be looking to get a better understanding of that model – its strengths, weaknesses and whether it is a feasible option for Australia.

Of course, the Athena SWAN model wasn’t the only topic discussed, so we will be looking to take away all outcomes regarding women in science to help shape our future plans in this area. This might mean considering alternative models, new grant schemes, adjustments to peer review, etc.

How crucial is this Workshop to addressing the underrepresentation of women in science?

Gender equity has really been pushed to the forefront of research policy this year, which is fantastic, and I think the SAGE Forums have had an important part to play in this space. Like the Forum held earlier this year, November’s Workshop brought together a number of organisations and institutions with a common goal.

Change on the scale that we all want to see will not be easy, and won’t happen through the work of just one institution. It encompasses both cultural and structural problems, and we need collaboration on all fronts if we really want to make a difference.

Having a space where we can all talk about our own concerns and contributions means we can get a clear understanding of the whole picture, which is crucial in an issue as complex and entrenched as this.

Why was it important that NHMRC was involved in the SAGE Forum Workshop?

NHMRC is the largest funder of medical research in Australia, and has one of the largest budgets to support research of any organisation in the country. We support around 10,000 researchers, and if we are honest, half of those researchers should be women. Unfortunately that is not the case due to a range of factors (as at 2013, around 40 per cent of chief investigators were female) and we believe NHMRC has a responsibility to do our part to help rectify this.

This means looking at our own policies, and since we are leaders in the community, looking at how we can affect change in the institutions we support. Being involved in the SAGE Forum Workshop was an important part of that, since we are able to hear concerns, ideas and solutions from the broader research community – not just those in health and medical research.

An important question we really need to be able to answer is why do women leave science in the first place? I don’t imagine the solution is a simple one, but until we know that with some certainty, a lot of the action we take to try to retain women will be based on educated guess work.

What are your hopes for the future regarding the wider representation of women in scientific research? How will the Workshop contribute to this?

I think one of the biggest problems that needs to be addressed is the lack of women in senior research positions. This is true not only of medical research, but science across the board.

At NHMRC, women outnumber men in career entry grant applications by a ratio of almost 2:1, but in our most senior fellowship scheme, the reverse is true. I would really like to see more being done to retain female researchers, and to help support them to become leaders in their fields.

Without substantial improvements in leadership, there will always be fewer role models at the top to encourage and inspire young female researchers, and the cycle will no doubt continue. The impact of having women at the top is enormous – knowing that others have ‘made it’ before you is a constant reminder that it can be done, and is incredibly inspiring and motivating.

This is a matter not just for NHMRC, but for all research institutions and one that I hope we can all work together to improve.