

Men and women as partners for change: Moving from commitment to action in working for gender equality

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Gender is back on the agenda in Australian Higher Education. The sector has moved through cycles of activity and inactivity over a number of decades. Most recently the advent of the Athena SWAN pilot has been enthusiastically embraced by the sector with 32 institutions, universities and research institutes, jumping on board. The Athena SWAN Charter accreditation process established in the UK is designed to improve the promotion and retention of women and gender minorities within STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine). What is not yet clear is whether and how individual institutions might engage with men under this banner. The public discourse both in Australia and elsewhere has pragmatically turned towards the role of men in bringing about change. Bringing men into the fight for equality this approach is not unproblematic, relying on a heroic and top down model of change (de Vries, 2015).

This pilot project adopts a very different model of change, seeking to better equip men and women, as activist change agents within their spheres of influence at various levels of the organisation and with the support of each other. Rather than gender equality focussing on making organisations better places for women, this approach explicitly acknowledges that gender inequity can adversely affect men and women (though often in different ways), and greater equity can and should serve us all. As with all strategies of inclusion, the 'dominant' and 'non-dominant' group members have different work to do and different roles to play in building more gender equitable workplaces and society. The Partners for Change workshop brought together men and women identified as committed to gender equality to form a gender balanced workshop group with a male and female co-facilitators. The workshop format included conversations in single gender and mixed gender formats and opened up the gender issues and differences in a way that promoted deep dialogue. The presentation will present data collected during the workshop regarding gender issues in the workplace, the way this challenges common assumptions about working for gender equality, and the avenues explored by participants in working for change. While this work is in the early stages it nonetheless provides an optimistic and innovative approach to harnessing the energy and goodwill of staff, whilst building the capacity to create change.

de Vries, J. A. (2015). Champions of gender equality: female and male executives as leaders of gender change. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 34(1), 21-36. doi:10.1108/edi-05-2013-0031