

Report on GEAR Forums – September 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 9th and 14th September, approximately 30 JCU women joined two GEAR Forums. 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.

Update to GEAR Forum from Coordinators

Updates from Previous Forums

- **Parenting rooms and open offices:** Some women want to continue working while expressing but feel uncomfortable in open plan spaces or offices without locking doors. Parenting facilities are designed to provide a break from the demands of work and study. HR and Estate will audit existing facilities in line with best practice recommendations. Staff using these facilities may like to consult the [Australian Breastfeeding Association](#) resources. A good outcome for JCU is one where staff are supported to make choices about parenting that suit their needs.
- **Onboarding and induction:** Feedback and suggestion about induction has been incorporated into the action plan, and conversations within HR are taking that feedback on board.
- **Pastoral care and HDR students:** There were concerns raised about the experiences of some women HDR students and a previous forum suggestion was that HDR students have better access to information about the GEAR. GRS have been very supportive of incorporating information about the GEAR in HDR induction, on their webpage, in advisor training, and communicating about the forums via the HDR mailing list.
- **Senior management:** Gender equity is on the agenda at the September Senior Management Group (SMG) meeting, including discussion of issues around open plan offices, communication, modelling leadership in gender equity, men taking responsibility for gender equity and talking publicly about caring responsibilities, and transparency in decision-making.

Completed & Ongoing Actions

- Prof Lisa Kewley presented academic workforce modelling to the Senior Staff Conference in November 2020 and recommended specific initiatives for recruitment and retention of women. Data collection is underway by CSE for this modelling to be completed within the College.
- Staff who sit on promotion panels and selection panels should all complete a training module, sourced from SBS and available within LearnJCU, on gender equity.
- HR have developed a "Keeping in Touch Days" factsheet for staff taking parental leave.

Actions in Progress

- Work around data collection and reporting is underway in a number of areas, and will be reported to VCAC, HR Committee of Council, and the GEAR team when it is available.
- CSE has made progress with advertising women-only positions, and has a proposal to increase attractiveness of open positions for women applicants.
- PDP forms will soon be updated to indicate that performance expectations are pro-rated relative to opportunity – so staff with periods of part-time work or significant leave have a proportional expectation of outputs.
- Work continues to ensure synergies between Reconciliation Action Plan, Indigenous Workforce Strategy, and Gender Equity Action Plan. The GEAR Coordinators would like to hear from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women about how things are going for you.

Forum Discussion Summary

Returning from Parental Leave

- Staff on fixed-term contracts who take parental leave do not automatically have their contracts extended to accommodate the period of absence. Women recommend that this should be the exception – that is, contracts that are not extended for some reason (like funding expiry dates) need a justification.
- Women told us that research staff often work during parental leave in excess of the 10 Keeping in Touch days – as this work is often not back-filled or reallocated.
- Women suggested more support is needed for staff returning from parental leave – it usually takes twice as long to “catch up” on the period of leave in terms of research outputs.

Parenting Rooms

- As noted in the GEAR Coordinator update above, best practice is to provide parenting spaces away from the demands of work and study.
- Some women told us that multi-tasking while breastfeeding or expressing is difficult, and this task should be seen as productivity in its own right. Other women report that they wish to be able to choose to continue working while expressing. Ultimately, women should be supported to manage breastfeeding/expressing in the way that works best for them, not a one-size-fits-all.
- More information is needed about how many staff use those rooms with children vs with, eg, breast pumps.

Remote and Flexible Work

- Women are interested in further information about how this develops and the longer-term options.
- As discussed in previous forums, some work units have expectations that staff have returned to work on campus, while others maintain flexibility.
- Academics have limited uptake of Remote Working agreements – some women reported that this is likely because these staff already have flexibility (through not having a span of regular hours) and do not want to lose the ability to be responsive to changing demands of caring responsibilities.
- There is also some skepticism about the intent of the forms – whether it is a risk mitigation strategy or a genuine attempt to support staff flexibility.

Sociocultural Issues

- Women reported that, while their team and manager might be supportive of work and home commitments, they still experience pressures from the world outside of JCU – for example, partners who work in male-dominated industries which means the expectation for caring work is still on mothers.
- We heard that attention is being paid to gender diversity on committees in some areas.
- However, many decisions are made outside committee and rely on interpersonal connections, and some women told us they are still being left out of this.
- The promotion process could better recognise industry, service & leadership commitments, which take time away from research but still demonstrate excellence and contribute to the university in important ways. This isn't just about updating the promotion application form but requires managers and promotion panels to change their attitudes about what kind of track record makes someone eligible for promotion.
- When women adopt assertive communication styles this can be interpreted as aggression. Questions were raised about how HR might support managers, especially men, to challenge stereotypical expectations that women be polite and deferential.

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