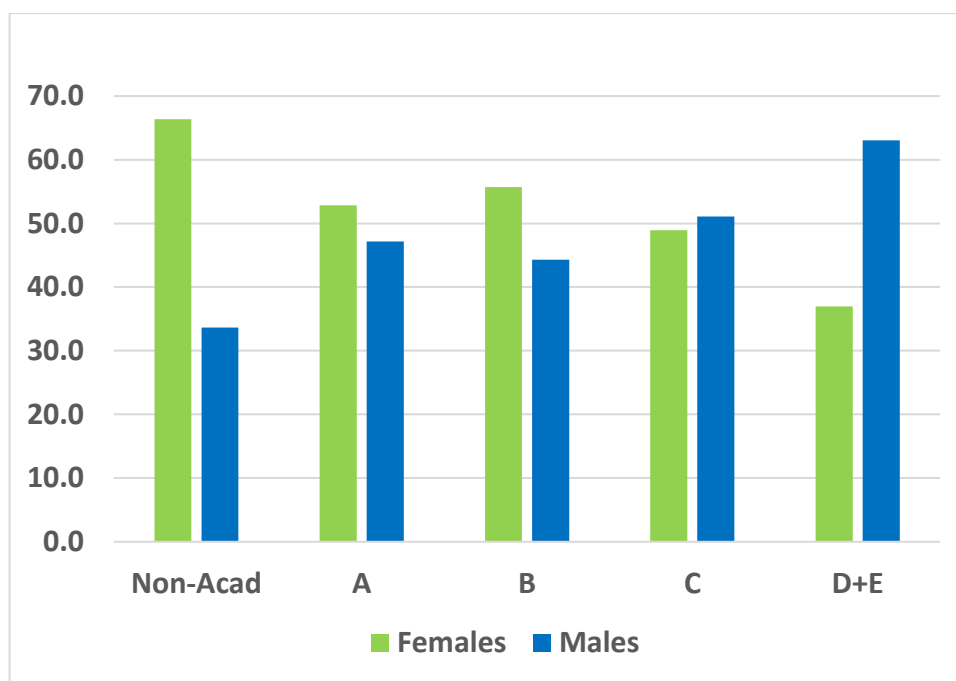

Improving the Under-representation of Women in Senior Roles in Higher Education

The chart below shows the continuing under-representation at academic levels D and E across Australian Higher Education (HE) institutions.

**% by Gender in F/T & Fractional F/T
HE Staff Numbers in 2021 [DESE]**



There are a number of common myths about why there aren't more women in senior HE roles. These myths include:

- women are not as interested in senior roles as men are
- women don't perform well in senior roles compared with men
- there aren't enough women available for these roles.

Some valid reasons for the under-representation are:

- for a variety of reasons, women don't apply for these roles as much as men do
- some men in charge favour men and discriminate against women in recruitment, promotion and in other decisions.

Why do these men discriminate against women? It could be either deliberate or unintentional, but a major factor is cognitive bias. As humans we are all biased, i.e. we form opinions and make decisions which do not accord with relevant facts or data.

Two common biases affecting recruitment and promotion decisions are:

- In-group and Out-group Bias: we favour people with similar characteristics, interests or backgrounds to ourselves and are uncomfortable with and act to disadvantage others
- Halo Effect: we assume that because someone has some positive features or characteristics, they have other positive characteristics. The opposite is called the Horn Effect.

Unfortunately there are many more biases relevant to recruitment and promotion!

Biases can be unconscious or conscious; we are all subject to both types. Our unconscious mind is extremely powerful; it forms associations and opinions without our conscious knowledge, and when we make decisions, unconscious bias or conscious bias are usually present.

Bias mitigation training is very popular but there is little evidence it reduces bias, because it is hard to change unconscious associations; they can even remain in conflict with our conscious beliefs.

Rather than just documenting the under-representation of women in senior positions, it is important to design and implement a valid solution. Our recommendations for organisations are:

- ensure that advertised roles are described in a gender-neutral way
- ensure that appropriate policies and procedures are followed
- organise discussions on 'merit' (a subjective concept susceptible to bias)

- organise removal of personal data for shortlisting candidates
- identify and encourage suitable women to apply for positions and promotions.

Panel members or individuals making recruitment/promotion decisions should:

- ensure clear non-gendered judging criteria are used
- take into account gender differences, eg. awareness of stereotypes and self-estimation differences
- understand the major biases relevant to recruitment and promotion decisions, their causes and their mitigation
- if on a panel, constructively discuss their own and other members' biases before and after making decisions, in a transparent process.

In conclusion, the first step in improving the number of women in senior HE roles is understanding the reasons for the problem. The second step is tackling these reasons with appropriate mitigation strategies. The third step is establishing best practice in recruitment and promotion decision-making, and demanding it is followed across the organisation.