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Corresponding Author: Ms. Somali Cerise, MSc

Corresponding Author's Institution: Male Champions of Change

First Author: Jane Latimer, PhD

Order of Authors: Jane Latimer, PhD; Somali Cerise, MSc; Pavel Ovseiko, DPhil; Jill Rathborne, PhD; Saraïd Billiards, PhD; Wafa El-Adhami, PhD

Disrupting the status quo: Australia’s strategy to achieve gender equality in STEM

Jane Latimer PhD^{1,2}, Somali Cerise^{3*}, Pavel V Ovseiko DPhil⁴, Jill M Rathborne PhD⁵, Saraid S Billiards PhD⁵, Wafa El-Adhami PhD^{5*}

Author institutional addresses – see p.6

Correspondence to

* Ms Somali Cerise
Program Director
Male Champions of Change STEM
GPO Box 396, Sydney NSW 2001
Australia
somali@malechampionsofchange.com

* Dr Wafa El-Adhami
Executive Director
Science in Australia Gender Equity
GPO Box 783, Canberra ACT 2601
Australia
wafa.el-adhami@science.org.au

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Lancet Commentary:

In Australia, increasing the representation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is a national imperative. In 2016, the Australian Federal government identified gender equality as a key platform in its National Innovation and Science Agenda.¹ While the efforts of women to advance gender equality in STEM remain central, men have been notably absent in these efforts despite holding the power and influence to create significant change. Engaging decent and influential men to work beside women to accelerate gender equality in STEM, is a major strategic opportunity and priority.

Recently, the Australian Federal government announced support for two complementary national programs to tackle gender equality: the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) program² and the Male Champions of Change STEM (MCC STEM).³ SAGE is a partnership between the Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering and is a program aimed at improving the attraction, retention, and success of women, trans and gender diverse individuals in the Australian STEM higher education and research sector. Currently, 45 higher education and research institutions are participating: 33 Australian universities (83% of all Australian Universities), six medical research institutions, and six publicly-funded research institutions. The program requires participating institutions to analyse data on gender equity and develop action plans for improvement. It has been informed in large part by the UK Athena SWAN.

The Male Champions of Change (MCC) STEM is a program which brings together senior male leaders at the CEO level from business, government, university and research sectors to 'listen, learn, and lead through action', with a view to taking practical action to accelerate progress on gender equality. In most organisations, the higher you climb the more you are deferred to and the less critical feedback you receive. The MCC program flips this approach by asking leaders to listen deeply to the

insights of their employees and experts, particularly women, to reflect on the human experiences of gender inequality in their organisations and their own role, and to personally lead system-wide actions. MCC STEM provides one of the few spaces where senior men can step up beside their female counterparts to help drive change, and importantly, be held accountable for their actions.

The MCC STEM group brings together senior, influential male leaders who are committed to using their power and influence to deliver change in STEM. The MCC STEM strategy, in targeting only men, has been purposefully designed as a disruptive approach to challenge the status quo and accelerate gender equality. Since many of the current STEM systems and structures were developed by men, and men typically hold the STEM senior leadership roles, engaging men is critical for driving the transformational change that is required to the established systems, structures, and cultures that reinforce gender inequality. For example, MCC STEM have recently focussed on redefining merit⁴ to remove the gender bias inherent in many merit assumptions. By challenging male leaders to reflect on their application of merit, to call out biases, assumptions, and stereotypes, and ask '50/50 if not, why not?' at all stages of recruitment and promotion processes, a simple but disruptive strategy is put in place to affect change.

While both programs are designed to embed a systems approach to reversing gender inequality by moving beyond the common approach of 'fixing the women' to instead focus on 'fixing the system', the two programs use vastly different approaches. SAGE is a highly analytical, structured, and long-term program that deploys a reflective process guided by the UK's Athena SWAN,⁵ while the MCC STEM is a disruptive, experimental, and agile program focussed on CEO-led practical action within a short time-frame. Recently it has been acknowledged that there could be great value in these two programs working together to accelerate the progress of gender equality in STEM, the collective achieving more than either program alone.

In 2018, the two national programs commenced a collaborative project to help accelerate change drawing upon the Leadership Shadow which is a reflective analytical tool to strengthen personal leadership on gender equality⁶ (Figure). Noting the challenge many STEM institutions face in engaging senior male leaders in personally driving gender equality actions, SAGE and MCC STEM will convene a small group of male leaders from SAGE member institutions to consider what practical actions they can collectively and personally take to accelerate progress on gender equality. In doing so, this project will support leaders to accelerate progress by sharing learnings between the programs on effective gender equality leadership and identify practical actions to strengthen institutional performance on gender equality. Should this initial collaborative project demonstrate benefit, it will be expanded to include all SAGE senior leaders, both men and women.



Figure. The Leadership Shadow, Male Champions of Change and Chief Executive Women (Source: Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014) (Attribution CC BY 3.0 Australia)⁶

Momentum is building internationally and there has never been a more important time for nations like Australia to demonstrate leadership in driving gender equality initiatives.^{7,8} We must share promising practical actions with others around the world. We must commit to ensuring that gender equality becomes an equal priority alongside research and innovation. Change starts at the top and

engaging senior leaders is critical to achieving this. We call on men in positions of power to step up beside women and drive change in their sphere of influence.

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Footnotes for author affiliations:

1. School of Public Health, Sydney Medical School, University of Sydney, PO Box M179, NSW 2050, Australia
2. Elizabeth Broderick & Co., GPO Box 396, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia
3. Male Champions of Change STEM, GPO Box 396, Sydney NSW 2001 Australia
4. Radcliffe Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford OX3 9DU, United Kingdom
5. Science in Australia Gender Equity, GPO Box 783, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia