

Team focus to tackle gender bias

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Human resources expert Janine Pickering says institutions should be taking on the risk. Picture: Stuart McEvoy Source: News Corp Australia

Imagine if Nobel prizes weren't awarded to individuals but to institutions and the teams that collaborated to do the work. Where is the glory in that, some may ask?

But this may be the kind of radical cultural change academic science needs to embrace if it is to eradicate the in-built gender bias that discriminates against women, according to human resources expert Janine Pickering.

And she wants an overhaul of the competitive research grants system to focus on institutional grants rather than individual competition that disadvantages women and those men not prepared to sacrifice their carer duties and home life.

“Jobs that require someone else to look after their home life aren't sustainable in the 21st century,” Dr Pickering said.

In her recently completed doctoral thesis at Swinburne University, Dr Pickering found no significant difference between the seniority, responsibilities and pay of men and women working in the commercial biotech sector.

In contrast, in the university and research institutes sector she found what everyone has known for decades — women are still concentrated in lower level positions and on lower pay.

The clear implication is that academe needs to become more like commercial firms. But academic productivity is narrowly valued as an individual's ability to win grants and make discoveries, driving a focus on people having to work long hours.

At a stroke, Dr Pickering said, that eliminated many women, who still faced greater demands on their time from childcare and house work.

Dr Pickering has worked both sides of the fence — in human resources at the CSIRO, and at biotech firms Starpharma and Biota. She has analysed 400 job positions across 19 biotech firms and 11 academic research organisations, and interviewed 26 women and men working at them.

In the academic sector she found no evidence essential skills such as people management, mentoring, commercial knowledge or teamwork were valued. Instead, the focus was on the track record of researchers where career breaks and carer responsibilities quickly made them uncompetitive compared with colleagues.

“If you go off the narrow career track, that is not evidence that is valued,” she said.

“Scientists don’t feel they can take a break because they face not being able to get back in.”

Gender policies in academe aimed at making it easier for women to compete were destined to fail unless the nature of work and what was valued was changed.

She noted academe tried to account for “career interruption” when having a family wasn’t an interruption but normal.

“I don’t like to think of my family as a career interruption, but that is how it is thought of.”

She said the competitive grants system was a false economy as it drove researchers to invest increasing amounts of time writing applications to stay competitive. Instead, it should be the institution taking on the risk and promoting more collaborative, productive and flexible ways of working akin to a commercial firm.

“The institution should be at risk, but it is the individual researcher that is bearing the risk,” she said.

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