Australia’s wasted human potential

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In 2016 Australian women made up half of Australia’s workforce yet earned only 77 per cent of the average men’s income. Women remain underrepresented in leadership roles. While progress has been made in narrowing the gender gap, inequality remains an important issue in the Australian workforce.

At a Women in Leadership forum hosted by CEDA Professor Marcia Langton recounted her experiences growing up, studying and building a career under a cloud of racial and gender discrimination. Professor Langton AM set out a case for ambitious targets and high expectations to ensure the potential of Australian women and disadvantaged groups is never squandered.
I acknowledge the Turrbal traditional owners and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I would like to acknowledge a very special elder and author who is with us here today, Albert Holt.

What an honour it is to address you on women in leadership. I have attended several CEDA events and I agree with others that the cross-sectoral mix of participants and speakers, the neutrality of the presenters, their rigour, their respect for diversity, willingness to innovate and frankness, are rare qualities in our public life making CEDA an ever more important national institution.

Allow me to say a few things about my personal history. I was born here in Brisbane. My grandfather, an Iman man from the Upper Dawson River Valley who married my grandmother in Bidia country on the Mitchell River. I lived as a child in many places here in southern Queensland from the coast to the far inland. I lived in houses from time to time but also a corrugated iron shack and a tent. I was a pupil at nine schools and it seemed that at each one the racial discrimination seemed worse by turn, until I attended the University of Queensland where, in 1969, it was intolerable. The constant racial abuse and harassment of Aboriginal people here in Queensland, along with a very formal system of legal control separation, toughened me for the challenges ahead.

I eventually finished a first class honours degree at the Australian National University and completed my PhD at Macquarie University. I worked here in Queensland in my adulthood for a period in Brisbane, and later in the north, and undertook the field work for my PhD in Eastern Cape York.

I came of age in the civil rights era and realised at a young age that I had a responsibility to beat the odds. I came to this conclusion both as a result of the wise counsel of older people who had been denied an education but sought equality, and as a result of watching those around me with so many odds stacked against them they conceded defeat. This was painful to watch and a fate that I refused. There were many in the Aboriginal community here in Brisbane who were influenced by Martin Luther King Junior, but there were also others such as Pastor Don Brady who favoured the Black Power movement. I became familiar with the various civil rights schools of thought. To hear expressions such as: “Equal rights”, “Black is beautiful”, said out loud gave me a new way of thinking about our situation.

Many of my older Aboriginal family members had lived on the large administered reserves and skin colour ranged across all the tones. But whatever their colour without a written exemption from the Department of Native Affairs, they were wards of the state. Others had been released by the superintendents of these reserves to work for station owners, where in some cases they worked under indentured labour conditions. I think of my life course as a trajectory from a dirt floor to a glass ceiling. When I heard an American woman outlining
feminism in Japan in 1970 a new language was introduced to me, and I recognised immediately the vision of being a fully completed human being with a right to achieve my destiny without discrimination.

This has not been an easy path but I recommend to all young women to choose their right to exist in their full potential over any lesser fate. International Women's Day on the 8th of March each year reminds us that we must do more to ensure that the full potential of women in all aspects of human endeavour should be unleashed by removing the sexist discrimination and limits to their equal treatment in the home, the workforce, and in society.

For myself the disparity for Australian indigenous women in education inclusion and other areas of life, is a glaring injustice. The right of women to choose their own pathways to life, to be mothers or not as they wish, be educated, to seek a career, to work, to be rewarded for their work and to be treated with dignity. All of these remain elusive abstractions of human rights standards, so many women never enjoyed, but nevertheless a very serious goal that all of us must pursue.

In Australia women have campaigned for and won a measure of equality. Australia is not the most progressive country in the world with respect to women’s rights and enjoyment of their rights, nor is our nation at the bottom of the graph with the countries where women are treated as property, denied education, denied the right to own property, denied most basic freedoms, and treated in appalling ways physically and emotionally. Australia is in about the middle, and this is the international data from the OECD.

But let me turn to Libby Lyons’s work. She is the CEO of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, and Libby reported last year at CEDA events on the third year of the agency’s reporting of this kind of data. It is worth reiterating the picture presented in the 2016 report here on work places with more than 100 workers and data compiled from 12,000 employers and four million employees. So that’s the data snapshot. Men earn nearly $27,000 a year more than women, five out of six CEOs are men, but the pipeline of women into manager roles is strengthening. Women make up half of the nation’s workforce but earn only 77 per cent of men’s average full-time income according to the latest gender equality score card.

The new data shows the average full-time female employee took home almost $27,000 less than the average male employee in 2015–16 with the salary difference rising to almost $94,000 at the top level of management. Women are also underrepresented in leadership roles, holding just 16.3 per cent of CEO and 37.4 per cent of all manager roles. The score card shows improvement in key gender equality indicators with lower pay gaps and greater movement
of women into management roles and increased action from employers to address gender equality. So, the percentage point movement since 2013–14 on full-time total remuneration is at 23 per cent. The largest industry gender pay gap is in the financial and insurance services at 33.5 per cent but it’s down 2.6 per cent. Key management personnel who are women: 28.5 per cent – it’s up by 2.4 per cent. Employers with policies to support gender equality – almost 71 per cent, and that’s up 4.5 per cent. Employers who have conducted a gender pay gap analysis – 27 per cent, up three per cent. And appointments of women to manager roles – 42.6 per cent, and that’s a new data point.

And so Ms Lyons reported the data confirms the gender pay gap is in favour of men in every industry and the underrepresentation of women in management and leadership roles. Employers are stepping up to the challenge in greater numbers with proactive gender equality policies. For the first time more than 70 per cent of employers reported they had policies in place to support gender equality. So that’s your close the gap summary.

In my own sector, the higher education sector, there is good practice towards gender parity. The Universities Australia, inter-institutional gender equity statistics are summarised on this graph1 and the red line is the median.

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**FIGURE 1**

**REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE ACADEMIC STAFF – THE UNIVERSITY SECTOR 2012 (2014)**

![Graph showing representation of female academic staff in the university sector](image)

*Source: Universities Australia*
So the representation of female academic staff across the sector stood at 43.9 per cent. The institution with the highest representation of female staff was the Batchelor Institute in the Northern Territory with 70.4 per cent at the other end. And this is the higher education institution with the highest proportion of enrolled indigenous students because of its founding purpose. But the very low numbers and proportions of indigenous people employed in the higher education sector and the parity goals present the nation with a challenge.

Kilborn, Lock and Scheepers in *The Conversation*² state the situation in this way: women may outnumber men in the ranks of the university students but men still outnumber women in leadership roles in nearly all areas of professional work places. But discrimination is not a simple problem and there are cohorts of men who are disadvantaged. Professor Eleanor Ramsay also writing in *The Conversation*³ asked the question: there are fewer males at university so should they be an equity group? Her conclusion was this: the focus on total numbers of male and female students overlooks the differences in socioeconomic disciplinary and institutional patterns with large numbers of males more privileged on each of these dimensions. Thus simply targeting an increase in male student enrolments could lead to increased enrolments from high-socioeconomic status students. This would undermine the national target to reach 40 per cent of low-socioeconomic status students by 2020, and further increase males’ disproportionate representation amongst the most privileged students. But our missing male students, she writes, are indigenous, from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and regional and remote locations. So targeting these groups makes a lot more sense.

So needless to say the goal of indigenous parity in the Australian workforce and especially in the higher education sector is a distant goal. One’s professional life is shaped, yes, by family background, education, by career experiences and also by values. To speak of leadership is to speak of values. There is little I can say to an audience like this about leadership, except to say that for those who face discrimination, be it gender or race discrimination, the notions of equity, equality and dignity become the most important in seeking to fulfil our potential. To understand that such potential is greater than others can imagine becomes a particular kind of personal challenge demanding persistence and fearlessness. I have had to ask myself often: “What are you afraid of?” For me if the answer is the criticism or disdain of others who do not believe in my inherent potential, I can then feel comfortable in pursuing my goals regardless of the obstacles.

When I first enrolled at the University of Queensland I was one of two Aboriginal students. That was 1969. Now there are 30,000 indigenous university graduates. At the Universities Australia Conference in recent days Professor Peter
Buckskin reported that in 2016 there were about 400 indigenous academic staff working in Australia with 100 of those Associate Professors and above. Among the targets announced by Professor Tom Calma at the conference were these: maintain institutional growth rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s enrolment that are at least 50 per cent above the growth rate of non-indigenous student enrolment and ideally 100 per cent above. Aim for retention and success rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students equal to those of domestic non-indigenous students in the same fields of study by 2025. Aim to achieve equal completion rates by field of study by 2028.

And Universities Australia has released a comprehensive report to justify the new targets for indigenous equity. In 2015 there were more than 15,500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in universities. This equates to 1.6 per cent of all domestic enrolments. In the 2011 census 2.7 per cent of Australia’s working age population identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Since the introduction of a demand driven funding system for universities, indigenous enrolments have increased year on year by up to 10 per cent with an annual average over the period of approximately eight per cent. There are now 70 per cent more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending university than there were in 2008, while the overall domestic student population has increased by 37 per cent over the same period.

The indigenous enrolment growth rate in 2014–15 of about seven per cent, was more than triple that of the overall domestic rate. Since 2010 the number of Aboriginal and Torres Street Islander students graduating each year grew by 54 per cent compared to 21 per cent growth in non-indigenous student graduations. So those are very encouraging figures. But I’ve also mentioned the dark side and that is indigenous men are extremely disadvantaged in that picture. So our indigenous academic workforce has a very high proportion of females, our indigenous student population has a very high proportion of females.

The Closing the Gap data on overcoming indigenous disadvantage reported each year in parliament tell us clearly that there is a strong link between education and employment. At high levels of education there is virtually no employment gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people. The economic impact of parity goals in education for disadvantaged groups are now well understood, and I think that kind of data and also the workforce gender equity agency data puts paid to the arguments against affirmative action. These targets are affirmative action targets. The measures taken to reach them and the successors so far are affirmative action measures, and I don’t think that any of us would argue against affirmative action when each of us owes our education and our careers to those affirmative action measures.
So each one of these indigenous graduates will contribute economically to their own families and to the nation. Among the growing yet small indigenous professoriate and doctoral graduates there are outstanding women and each one a leader in a special way. Today here with us is Tracey Bunda, Professor Tracey Bunda of the University of Southern Queensland. In Melbourne, I’m lucky to have as a colleague Dr Misty Jenkins of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. Here in Queensland executive leaders such as Pro Vice Chancellors Professor Cindy Shannon and Professor Bronwyn Fredericks. Doctors such as Dr Sandra Eades of the Baker Institute, and many others, have shown that leadership is not just a matter of excellence in one’s field, but also a matter of values. Each one of my female colleagues in the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities who has made an outstanding contribution has resisted the soft bigotry of low expectations. We have in common our regard for others who deserve to reach their potential. This requires that we set ambitious targets for them and expect much more from them.

I sometimes think of this as survivor syndrome especially in a room full of men who see no need for these measures. But it’s more than that. That’s a negative way of looking at it. I’ve been fortunate to build up a circle of brilliant colleagues through having these values of wanting others to do well also because it improves all our lives. Success is measured financially but it is also measured in other ways. Our personal assessment of career satisfaction often lies in whether or not we have contributed to a better understanding of a problem, a better work place, a better society. In our daily lives this often comes down to whether or not we have reached out to others who are at risk of wasting their potential and offered them assistance in reaching their goals. This is the most satisfying part of being a teacher or a university lecturer. To develop successful strategies for populations larger than the people in our own immediate environments is another satisfying part of professional life. Needless to say gender equity has an economic impact. We need only think of the wasted potential of all those women who did not succeed in their fields because of gender discrimination. The same can be said of racial discrimination. I think of the thousands of indigenous people who might be enjoying the same standards of living as other Australians if they had been accorded equitably the opportunity of education.

The wasted potential, the loss of economic impact of the many thousands of people denied the opportunity to achieve their ambitions can be measured, and in some of the literature has been measured. Feminist history teaches us that the dissolving of the boundaries of the domestic roles attributed to women was a necessary part of the campaign for equality.
Beyond the domestic confines so rigorously maintained in an older more sexist Australia lay an economic frontier. This is why the reckoning of gender equity by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency is crucial and why the data it collects and reports is important. This is why the targets set for indigenous parity are important. If Australian governments and institutions regard the economic potential of women in the same way as for men and take seriously the economic waste that discrimination incurs, we begin to see change. Sharp and Broomhill discuss for instance the concept of gender budgets now introduced in 40 countries around the world. Our own Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has a gender equity approach to aid programs with targets of 50 per cent female involvement in supported projects. Australia’s Gender equality and women’s empowerment strategy of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade applies across all of the department’s work, and I often wonder why there isn’t such a strong policy domestically.

The new frontier involves the challenges posed by the fourth industrial revolution. Australia has a STEM problem. Our governments are failing to produce the numbers of graduates from schools and institutions of higher education in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields. This applies across our population and special policy and program attention is required for women and disadvantaged groups. In the same way that the progress we’ve made in the last 50 years on wage gaps, on gender equity in the work force has required special measures. The demands of a rapidly changing economy and work force with respect to investment in education and equity should be higher on the national policy agenda.

My university has a formal list of graduate attributes and these have made me think about the nature of citizen attributes that Australians might have. A full complement of desirable attributes would include a sufficiently high educational standard to provide the ability to compete in the new digital workplace environment: driverless cars, trucks, buses and entire operations operated by an automated framework are simply not news anymore. A high level STEM competence for all citizens might soon become a universal standard expected of all.

Women and disadvantaged groups must be catered for as we move further down the path of this industrial revolution. To fail to include them would be to waste their economic potential and to create an underclass of digital marginals. I will be investigating further the new report from Universities Australia on reaching indigenous parity with regard to this challenge. All Australians in the workforce will be affected, however, by the fourth industrial revolution. Presentations at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland have warned that the fourth industrial revolution will have an unevenly negative impact on the
economic prospects of women even though the sweeping changes caused by disruptions to the labour force will result in more women progressing into senior positions. Automation and disintermediation as imminent results of a fourth industrial revolution will lead to job losses that will impact both men and women equally. That’s a prediction for the United States of America and these impacts will vary from country to country, but Australia is not prepared for them in terms of education and labour force change strategies.

Alexandra Georgescu, Oracle University Marketing Manager\(^5\) has estimated the impacts in the US in the following: “Given women’s low participation in STEM professions some of the fastest growing areas of job creation, women stand to gain only one new STEM job for every 20 lost across other job families”.

I note that CEDA has paid attention to this problem and so too the Federal Government with its industry 4.0 taskforce and other initiatives. There is much more to be done. We need ambitious targets for women and for disadvantaged groups across our population to ensure that our nation avoids increasing the economic wellbeing divide based on ability to perform in an increasingly automated work place.

It makes sense that targets are feasible and staged. It is important that the issues are rigorously measured and reported. The right target is always parity but getting there as we know is difficult. It has been 50 years since I first entered a university as one of only two indigenous students and at a time that the idea of women university graduates was still highly suspect, especially here in Queensland. Today I can have this discussion with you as we consider the problem of gender equity. My dream was to be a scientist but racial discrimination prevented me from pursuing that course at about the age of 12. I have succeeded nevertheless because of another dream, the dream of equality. It is a matter for all of us to consider now whether we allow sub-optimal and out of date attitudes to damage our nation, our economy, and waste the potential of more than half of our citizens.

Endnotes

2. Kilborn, V, Loch, B and Scheepers, H. “Here’s how to get more women promoted to top jobs in universities.” The Conversation, 27 November 2015.
3. Ramsay, E. “There are fewer males at university, so should they be an equity group?” The Conversation, 7 September, 2015.
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