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Monash aims high with gender equity pilot

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Monash University professors Christina Mitchell (medicine) left, Kim Cornish (neurosciences) and Moira O'Bryan (anatomy and developmental biology).

Of all Australian universities, Monash should be the most benign territory for female academics trying to crash through the glass ceiling. Monash's vice-chancellor, provost and vice-provost of research are all women.

And while the upper echelons of medical faculties are notoriously male-dominated, the eastern Melbourne university again bucks the trend. It boasts the Group of Eight's only female dean of medicine, Australia's first female head of a surgery department and a female director of a neuroscience research institute.

While Monash is unique in its concentration of women at the top, it reflects other Australian universities on the next rung down, where men occupy about 80 per cent of professorial and associate professorial positions.

Now the university is addressing the problem through its pilot of Britain's Athena SWAN accreditation program, which aims to tackle gender bias in the academy.

Monash is one of 32 local institutions, including 25 universities, which have signed up to the two-year process. Detailed information on their policies, plans and gender profiles will be assessed and rated and successful competitors will be in line for "bronze" ratings — and possibly silver or gold, if the scheme progresses beyond pilot

stage

Monash's plans include a focus on unconscious bias. "You have to worry that you might be appointing people who are just like you," said vice-chancellor Margaret Gardner.

Professor Gardner, Australia's most senior female university boss, said having an executive dominated by women did not necessarily solve broader problems of gender balance. "But when you discuss diversity, it helps make an organisation more sensitive to all forms of diversity," she said. "We're attuned to understanding that you have to be conscious of unconscious bias."

Reproductive biologist John Carroll, who is leading Monash's participation in the pilot, said unconscious bias training sessions were being run for all senior staff in a position to affect research careers. "We are in a situation where five of our six heads of department and five of our six program leaders are men.

"While we clearly have a lot of women at the very pinnacle of our university, we've still got a very male-dominated management structure."

Professor Carroll said the female-heavy executive "balances things out a little bit".

"But often the decisions made at that level aren't really affecting the day-to-day research success of individuals in the labs.

"When you get promoted, when you finish probation, opportunities for leadership positions — all those questions are primarily being addressed in an environment which is very male-dominated."

Other Athena SWAN initiatives include a 60 per cent limit on either gender's representation on promotion, probation and recruitment committees. The same applies to shortlists for positions at senior lecturer level and above.

Professor Carroll said meeting the committee target had proven challenging, because members required a degree of seniority. "The risk you run is that the 20 per cent of women you have (at that level) end up spending most of their time on committees and not on research."

Developmental biologist Moira O'Bryan, who heads a gender equity committee covering three of Monash's biomedical institutes, said women's reluctance to apply for top positions was a factor. Most applicants for these jobs were men. "We need to be looking around for these bright young women, and saying, 'you're ready'."