

Position Paper 2: Impact of COVID-19 on Women Students in the University Sector

While governments across the globe develop strategies in response to the health and economic crises caused by COVID-19, it is clear that the gendered impact will extend well beyond the present emergency. On 10 April 2020 António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, directed attention to this, calling for urgent and immediate action. He stated that the pandemic is having 'devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls' and urged governments and institutions to put gender issues at the centre of COVID-19 responses.

The Independent Scholars Association of Australia (ISAA) views with deep concern the gendered impact of COVID-19 within the university sector in 2020. The current Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows that there was a drop of 7 percent or 86,000 in the number of women enrolled at universities and some vocational courses in 2020 compared with 2019. The drop in male enrolments was 2 percent or 21,200 in the same period. The decline in female participation was most marked among older women, and there was a drop of 59,200 in women above 25. Overall, this decline in female participation was the largest yearly drop since the ABS began collecting this data.

Recessions have generally seen increases in university enrolments but in 2020 social and political factors meant women were not only enrolling in university in lower numbers they were also dropping out at a significantly higher rate. Among those aged 25 to 29, 27,000 women dropped out and for those aged 35 to 39, the figure was 22,000. The key reasons – women with young families were acting as both teachers and primary carers during the lockdowns and older women were more likely to be caring for ageing or disabled parents or other family members.

Taken together, these figures suggest that in the longer term, this will result in greater disadvantage for women than men. This is because women are disproportionately impacted by disruption to working hours and job security, as well as bearing more of the caring responsibilities. Already, in many fields, in more precarious employment than men and still paid less than men, the disruption to the education of all women, but especially young women, will have lasting effects for Australia, as well as for individual women.

Government and other initiatives to support women in STEM in universities are important but must not come at the expense of women interested in studying in the Humanities. The recent increase in fees for Humanities subjects would suggest this to be current government policy.

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