Swinburne aims for equality in numbers and pay

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SWINBURNE has become Australia’s first university to set a target to achieve pay equality among its 275 senior managers and academics by 2020.

A gender analysis of pay rates at Swinburne revealed that senior men earned on average 6 per cent more than senior women, while at lower levels there was no disparity. Senior staff include senior lecturers and administrative directors, and above.

Swinburne vice-chancellor Linda Kristjanson said the relatively lower pay of senior women was likely due to their careers often being interrupted by child bearing and rearing, which left them “playing catch up” with their male colleagues.

She also aspires to achieve equal numbers of men and women at seniors levels.

Professor Kristjanson said “unconscious bias” often counted against women when applying for senior roles; increasing awareness and actively targeting equal numbers could help overcome the inequality. Women make up about 39 per cent of Swinburne’s senior staff.

Research has shown that selection panels, regardless of their composition in terms of gender, readily see strong male candidates as “assertive” while strong female candidates are often viewed negatively as “pushy”.

Professor Kristjanson said senior appointments would continue to be made on merit: but given merit was spread equally across the sexes, it was reasonable to expect senior management to reflect that.

“Gender is only one aspect of diversity but gender equity creates a more inclusive culture more generally in an institution,” she said.

“So we need to lead the pack on this because as a sector we are educating young people when they are developing their attitudes towards others and it is important to be fostering tolerance and compassion.”

Workplace Gender Equality Agency spokeswoman Clare Buttner said the agency wasn’t aware of any other university that had publicly committed to a pay equity target.

“This is a great initiative and it puts (Swinburne) in a leadership position,” Ms Buttner said.

Companies that are transparent on gender pay equity include National Australia Bank and St Barbara Mines, while SunCorp has committed to a gender pay analysis. WGEA awards annual Employer of Choice citations to institutions and companies based on their gender policies and achievements, but this year has substantially raised the bar. It now requires citation winners to have carried out a workplace gender pay analysis.

“Conducting a gender pay analysis is the first and critical step, followed by putting in place a plan to address any gender inequity,” Ms Buttner said. She said it was important that employers be transparent in reporting progress. This year’s Employer of Choice citation winners will be announced in November.