A university leading the way to equality

Professors Zdenka Kuncic and Katherine Belov discuss the University of Sydney’s efforts to enable female scientists to become leaders in their fields

Firstly, Zdenka, congratulations on your recent appointment as Director of Community and Research at the University of Sydney’s new Australian Institute for Nanoscale Science and Technology (AINST)! What excites you about taking on this new position and what challenges do you expect to face?

ZK: Arguably, the most exciting aspect of this role is the opportunity to be immersed in an environment where I am surrounded by cutting-edge research. There’s a real sense that the new technologies emerging from the knowledge being generated here are going to transform the world we live in. This is very much a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I feel privileged to be a part of it.

From my perspective, the key leadership challenge specific to this role is building a research community that will cut across both the organisational and discipline boundaries that exist, making our university functional at an operational level. However, as with any endeavour, the biggest challenge reaps the most rewards, and I’m already seeing evidence of how new connections in our community have led to more effective leverage of our intellectual capital and resources.

What does AINST do and what was it about the Institute that attracted you to take on the role of Director of Community and Research?

ZK: AINST is all about preparing Australia, and indeed the world, for the next generation of technologies that will reshape our society and economy. What attracted me most about taking on this role is the potential Australia has to lead this next revolution – one that will rival the computer revolution of the 20th Century and the Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century.

How far has the University of Sydney come in achieving its goal of creating and sustaining a university where the brightest researchers and most promising students – regardless of social or cultural background – can thrive and realise their potential?

KB: We’re making significant cultural changes towards achieving our goal. In the past year, the University appointed Fiona Krautil as the Director of Equity and Diversity strategy to help shift the conversation and accelerate the journey towards lived equity and inclusion. The Senate has adopted a robust strategy and the organisation has adapted best practices, such as the Faculty of Science’s Women in Science (WiSci) network, and rolled them out across the institution to effect faster change. In this sense, we’re identifying innovative practice and scaling it up; since 2012, we’ve had a 6 per cent increase in female professors.

Broadly speaking, how will an increase in women leaders bring value to the University and society in general?

ZK: It will bring in fresh perspectives, outlooks and approaches based on different life and career experiences. Ultimately, this will enrich the culture of the University and wider society, enabling us to achieve more ambitious goals than would otherwise be possible without representation from all stakeholders.

What makes the University unique in its approach to encouraging leadership in women?

ZK: The University has been remarkably successful in supporting leadership in women and I think this can largely be attributed to its ability to offer a diverse range of career development opportunities for women. As opposed to a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, ours acknowledges that women at varying stages in their career with different personal circumstances clearly need different kinds of support.

KB: We have an intriguing and egalitarian foundation, which makes us unique, especially given that we are a member of the elite Group of Eight (Go8) universities of Australia. Our founder, William Charles Wentworth, was the son of a convict and wanted a university open to all, without prejudice.

A diverse workforce, built on respect and inclusion, is vital to the university; therefore we’ve devised a Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Framework in which gender equality is a key component. Such a strategy requires commitment at all levels, especially among our leaders. Men must stand beside women to achieve gender equality. The current Vice-Chancellor Dr Michael Spence’s commitment to this was exemplified when he joined the Male Champions of Change, becoming the first Australian Vice-Chancellor to do so.

In addition, the way we are bringing change to the institution makes us unique in this sector. Our Chancellor, Belinda Hutchinson AM, talks about moving from a glacial pace to one of small but significant shocks to culture to accelerate the pace of change.
ONE NANOMETRE IS a measurement equivalent to one billionth of a metre or approximately the size of ten atoms in a row. If nanotechnology can be understood as the manipulation of matter on an atomic scale, then nanoscience should be understood as the study of both the structure and function of said matter. While the concepts that ultimately led to the development of nanotechnologies were first presented by physicist Richard Feynman in 1959, the term ‘nano-technology’ was not used until 1974.

Because nanoscale entities have an extremely large surface area with respect to their volume, they often react very quickly and therefore boast a tremendous amount of potential applications – despite the still-relative infancy of research into this field, nanotechnology is already used in important areas such as medical imaging. According to the Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies, some three to four products employing nanotechnology become available each week and future applications are being identified all the time.

ADOPTING NEW STRATEGIES

Discoveries and developments within both nanoscience and nanotechnology are a cause for celebration – and with the creation of the Australian Institute for Nanoscale Science and Technology (AINST) comes another. For, although nanoscience and nanotechnology are traditionally male-dominated disciplines, when the AINST officially launches in April 2016 it will have a female scientist as its Director of Community and Research. The appointment of Professor Zdenka Kuncic is indicative of the University of Sydney’s strong agenda for promoting leadership in women, ushering in a new generation that leads the way in making a real change to the local, national and international science community.

Indeed, the University of Sydney is continuously implementing a range of programmes and opportunities to enable their female scientists to succeed in becoming leaders in their field. For too long women have been held back from achieving this goal and so, despite there being

The appointment of Professor Zdenka Kuncic is indicative of the University of Sydney’s strong agenda for promoting leadership in women, ushering in a new generation that leads the way in making a real change
significant obstacles to overcome in order to achieve the University’s mission, the strategy is designed to do just that.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE
As a member of the University of Sydney’s Science in Australia Gender Equity Athena Swan working group, Professor Katherine Belov is all too aware of some of the challenges the University’s initiatives must overcome. “The biggest obstacle is reframing the narrative from one that views diversity and inclusion as compliance issues to a strong and consistent narrative. In this new narrative, inclusion and diversity are powerful business enablers that will allow the University to become successful in all that it aspires”.

The narrative Belov speaks of is crucial in terms of moving away from the mindset that assumes women should remain fixed, or suffer, in a framework of low expectations. As such, the University of Sydney requires their leaders to be part of the communication strategy and coach their teams, thereby encouraging everyone to be part of the journey.

EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK
The need to ensure parity in terms of gender pay is absolutely vital in upholding what the University is trying to achieve – and addressing this issue is at the forefront of the University of Sydney’s activities. “The University is finalising a repeatable and robust reporting and analysis framework for evaluating and improving gender pay equity across the whole University,” explains Belov. “This will enable the identification and validation of cultural, policy and/or structural issues related to remuneration management that might be responsible for existing gender pay equity gaps.”

The leadership and cultural strategies the University has implemented will continue to enable the achievement of tangible goals. The inclusion and equality of women, in addition to an increase in women leaders, brings value to both the University of Sydney and wider society. Indeed, the University will improve organisational performance by increasing gender equality: reflecting the community that they represent, attracting and retaining better talent and leading by example. “Leaders and staff who participated in the consultation process agree that having a more diverse workforce, and more women and diverse groups in leadership would enhance the University’s teaching and research performance,” enthuses Belov. “There is an evident ‘appetite for change’ from leaders and female staff for increased diversity and inclusion.”

By the end of the first quarter of 2020, the University of Sydney intends to ensure that 40 per cent of their senior leaders (a rise of 7 per cent) and 40 per cent of their level E academic staff (a rise of 12 per cent) are women. By embracing diversity, inclusion and women leaders – not least through having a woman as one of the three Directors of AINST – the University of Sydney is leading the way.

FUELLING WOMEN’S CAREER AND LEADERSHIP GAINS

The Women’s Career Acceleration and Leadership Strategy (WCALS), is a fundamental part of the University of Sydney’s 2016-2020 Strategic Plan. It seeks to improve women’s representation in leadership roles and will drive the achievement of the strategy’s goals through a suite of initiatives. The key pillars of WCALS are:

1. Inclusive leadership training will be given to all senior leaders to equip them with the knowledge, business case and tools necessary for driving and mobilising staff for cultural change

2. Gender targets and measures will be put in place to track progress and outcomes. This includes the creation of key performance indicators for leaders and managers. It also features the tracking of culture from both qualitative and quantitative data to build and analyse and, where necessary, intervene in longitudinal trends

3. Investigating and addressing gender pay equity

These key pillars work alongside the following strategic initiatives:

• Career development programmes to create a level playing field for women
• Significant events
• Visible communications and staff networks
• Implementing and managing flexible working arrangements
• Expanding relevant policies, systems and practices to increase gender inclusion

Regarding this multitude of initiatives and interventions, Professor Katherine Belov says: “Together, they form an integrated strategy to drive and support gender equality at the University of Sydney. Additionally, the University remains cognisant that established mechanisms like anti-bullying and anti-harassment tools and policies need to be maintained and supported to ensure a holistic and ongoing system to support women”.