

Assessing Achievement ‘Relative to Opportunity’ Discussion Paper

Introducing ‘Achievement Relative to Opportunity’

Since 2014, ECU has applied the principle of achievement relative to opportunity to academic staff promotion assessment. Promotion applicants are asked if they have had any career breaks, carer responsibilities, part-time work, or any other personal situation which may have adversely affected their cumulative work achievements and productivity. This information is disclosed so that the impact of those personal circumstances can be taken into account when a promotion committee assesses an individual’s contribution to the University’s academic activities and whether they are performing at the academic level being applied for, in promotion.

The objective of applying the principle of achievement relative to opportunity is to acknowledge that individuals have varying life experiences that impact on work and productivity, and that although an individual’s achievements may appear different to those who work full-time, or have had continuous employment, their achievements have value in terms of career progression. Although much continues to be done on gender equality in the workplace, it remains the case that women’s careers are far more likely than men’s to be adversely affected by such circumstances. There is a compounding or multiplier effect on ‘career capital’ from achievement patterns in the early to mid-career phases and this is where career breaks are most likely to occur for women, due predominantly to parenting responsibilities. This lost opportunity can be very difficult to make up for particularly in performance metrics criteria that are quantitative and cumulative across time.

One approach to redressing this disadvantage and addressing inflexibility in assessment metrics and standards for those who have had career interruption is through applying the principle of achievement relative to opportunity. Applying the principle of achievement relative to opportunity is an important demonstration of ECU’s commitment to gender equity.

The challenge

Most Australian universities apply the principle of achievement relative to opportunity in academic staff assessment, particularly in the academic staff promotion process. The Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) apply the principle of achievement relative to opportunity in funding application assessment processes. However, the higher education and research sectors are still grappling with how the principle of achievement relative to opportunity is applied across all of their academic staff assessment processes.

At ECU, the Human Resources Services Centre (HRSC) is reviewing how the principle of achievement relative to opportunity can be claimed and applied in a fair and equitable manner to academic staff assessment processes. Systemic and consistent application of the principle aligns with ECU’s values and will support the increase of numbers of women in disciplines where they are underrepresented.

This paper outlines how ECU currently applies the principle of achievement relative to opportunity in academic staff assessment and poses questions for the university community to consider on the application of the principle at ECU. HRSC will consult with stakeholder groups on approaches to achievement relative to opportunity and individual feedback will also be welcome.

Background on achievement relative to opportunity

In the last decade, variations of the principle of achievement relative to opportunity have been integrated in selection and eligibility criteria across a number of domains in the higher education and research sectors. In 2010, the Group of Eight (GO8) Universities Human Resources Directors Staff Equity Subcommittee published a paper on consideration of merit relative to opportunity¹ recommending “to incorporate the principle of *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* into all employment and performance-related decisions within GO8 institutions” and to lobby research granting bodies to apply the principle in their activities. The ARC introduced

¹ Group of Eight HR Directors Staff Equity Subcommittee, 2010

'Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence' (ROPE)² in 2011 for the National Competitive Grants Program, replacing the selection criterion of 'track record relative to opportunities'. It was "introduced to help provide a more realistic consideration of a researcher's capabilities and assist those who have had career interruptions for family and other reasons."³ To provide assessors with an accurate picture of career history, funding applicants were asked to describe any circumstances which may have impacted their research performance. Not only did this include any career breaks, carer responsibilities, illnesses, and part-time work, but also career choices and situations such as employment outside of academia, access to research mentoring and research support facilities. In 2014 the ARC developed their [ROPE Statement](#)⁴, which is still in effect. The statement outlines personal and career circumstances that can be considered in funding application assessment, and emphasizes the "quality and benefits of achievements is given more weight than the quantity or rate of particular achievements."

Many Australian universities publish brief statements on the principle of achievement relative to opportunity, predominately in academic staff promotion policy or other academic staff promotion materials.

The University is committed to providing an equal opportunity environment for its staff in its performance appraisal, continuing appointment and promotion processes through the principle of 'performance relative to opportunity'. The quality of the staff member's performance will be assessed against the standard for that level. In terms of expectations for activity and output, consideration will be given to the fraction at which they are employed, periods of absence and/or personal circumstances. Where information about a staff member's personal circumstances is provided, that information will remain confidential to the assessing committees.

[University of Queensland Promotion of Academic Staff Levels A –D – Policy, Section 6](#)⁵

The University recognises that academic staff contribute to its strategic goals in diverse ways. The achievements of applicants for promotion are considered relative to:

- *required working arrangements e.g. part-time work or flexible working arrangements;*
- *the opportunities that have been available to the applicant relative to the discipline and appointments held;*
- *career histories, including late entry to academia or interrupted career trajectories; and*
- *relevant personal circumstances e.g. carer responsibilities, disability or ongoing medical condition.*

The University recognises such circumstances do not alter the applicant's capacity to produce high quality work, but may have other impact, e.g. on the quantum of output. Assessing achievements relative to opportunity gives more weight to the overall quality and impact of achievements. Achievement relative to opportunity is not about expecting a lesser standard of performance.

[Macquarie University Academic Promotion Policy Section 5.1](#)⁶

² The acronym ROPE is used in relation to the assessment of research activities, whereas Relative to Opportunity (R2O) is used in relation to the assessment of all academic work, and can also be applicable to the assessment of professional staff work.

³ Australian Research Council [ARC], 2014

⁴ ARC, 2014

⁵ University of Queensland Policy and Procedures Library website <https://ppl.app.uq.edu.au/content/5.80.12-promotion-academic-staff-levels-d#Policy>

⁶ Macquarie University Academic Promotion Policy website <https://staff.mq.edu.au/work/strategy-planning-and-governance/university-policies-and-procedures/policies/academic-promotion#policy>

RMIT and Monash Universities have recently released comprehensive guides for staff and decision makers on applying the principle. RMIT's [Achievement Relative to Opportunity \(ARtO\) Guidelines for Academic Promotion](#)⁷ applies to academic staff promotions and refers staff to the ARC ROPE Statement. Monash University has a [website](#) with resources for staff and decision makers on the assessment of achievement relative to opportunity in all employment related policies and processes⁸.

Current application of achievement relative to opportunity at ECU

ECU's achievement relative to opportunity statement is located within the [ASPEO Framework](#)⁹, the framework by which academic work (teaching, research and university service activities) are measured by level and academic role.

Recognising Diversity and Equity

*The indicators and exemplars detailed in the ASPEO Framework are set as reasonable expectations of performance for an academic staff member. **However, the assessment of performance must be contextualised based on relative opportunity.***

Circumstances which may impact on opportunity include carer responsibilities, part-time work, transitions between academic and industry roles, and cultural practices. Such circumstances may impact the quantity or rate of output, or participation in certain academic activities. Assessment is therefore made on an outcome-quality basis, with consideration to opportunities available to the individual academic staff member. Academic staff entering into a part-time or flexible arrangement are to discuss and negotiate work priorities and timeframes with their line manager.

[ECU ASPEO Framework 2018](#), p.3

The ASPEO Framework (including the achievement relative to opportunity principle) is applicable in academic staff recruitment and selection, performance development and academic staff promotion. In recruitment and selection processes, there is no formal process for the application of the principle and therefore it is up to selection panels in how they apply the principle in selection processes. Similarly, with performance development and review, it is at the discretion of line managers as to how they apply R2O principles when appraising and planning development activities for their staff.

In the academic staff promotion process, applicants are asked within the application form of any personal circumstances that may have impacted their academic achievement.

You are encouraged to ensure your application for promotion clearly specifies any relevant personal circumstances to enable an assessment of your achievements relative to opportunity. Indicate which circumstances apply:

- *Family responsibilities (e.g. child rearing, elder care, illness of a partner / dependent)*
- *A temporary or permanent disability*
- *Periods of part-time work*
- *Relevant cultural expectations or circumstances*
- *Absence due to ill-health or injury*
- *Other (please specify)*

ECU Academic Staff Promotion Application Form (Level C / D) 2019 (*online version no longer available*)

Applicants can indicate more than one circumstance that relates to them. The online application form has a free text box available for the applicant to describe their circumstances and impact on their academic work. It is at the discretion of the individual applicant as to what personal information they supply. How committees interpret or weight the information provided by applicants is not available as an outcome of the committee deliberations.

⁷ RMIT Academic Promotions website http://www.rmit.edu.au/content/dam/rmit/rmit-images/staff-site/my-employment/documents/academic-promotions/2019/ARtO_Guidelines_for_Academic%20Promotion_2019.pdf

⁸ Monash University Academic Promotion website <https://www.monash.edu/academicpromotion/achievement-relative-to-opportunity>

⁹ Edith Cowan University [ECU], 2018. [ASPEO Framework](#).

Data from Academic Staff Promotion processes 2016 – 2019 presents an interesting view of how achievement relative to opportunity is claimed at ECU. Note: an abbreviation for achievement relative to opportunity 'R2O' is used on the graphics below.

Figure 1: Percentage of Academic Staff Promotion applicants claiming achievement relative to opportunity.

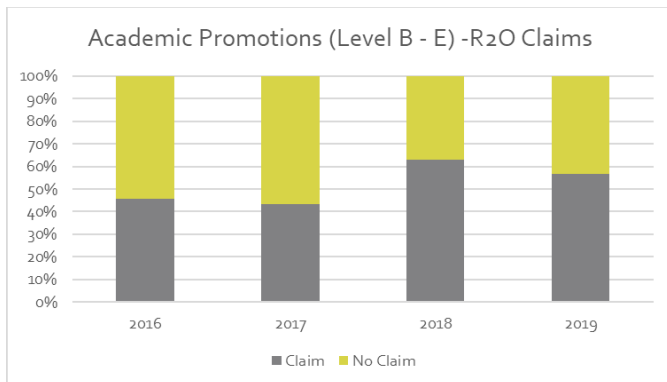
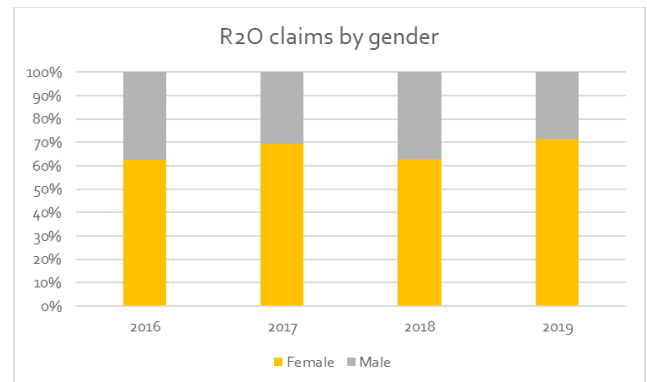
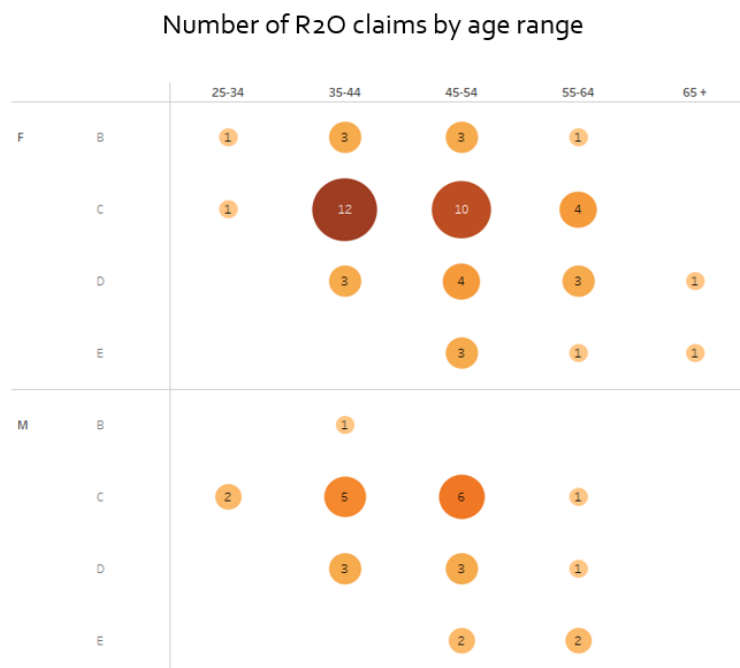


Figure 2: Gender breakdown of achievement relative to opportunity claims.



77 individuals (53%) of 145 academic staff promotion applicants (2016 – 2019) asked academic promotion committees to consider achievement relative to opportunity when assessing their promotion applications. 108 circumstances were indicated by the achievement relative to opportunity claimants. Women are twice as likely to claim achievement relative to opportunity consideration as men.

Figure 3: Number of Academic Staff Promotion applicants claiming achievement relative to opportunity by age range.



40% of all achievement relative to opportunity claims are by staff aged between 45 – 54 years old, which is closely followed by the 35 – 44 years old age group (35%). It is also heavily concentrated in the group of staff applying for Level C.

Figure 4: Number of achievement relative to opportunity claims by level.

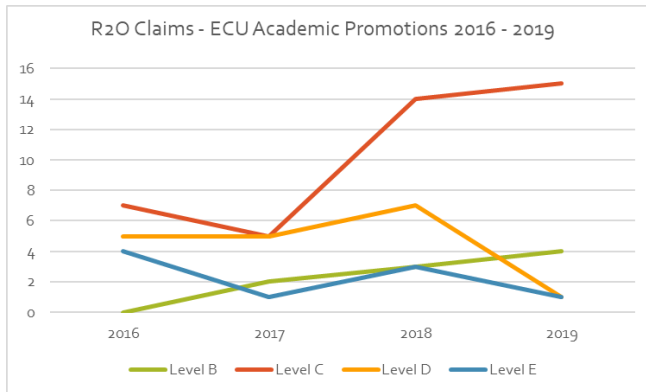
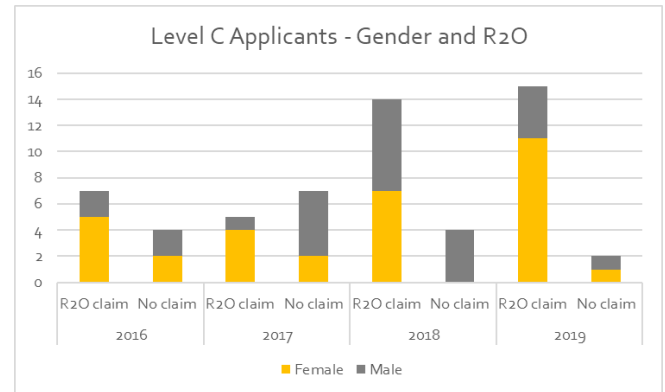


Figure 5: Level C applicants by gender and achievement relative to opportunity claims.



Over half of achievement relative to opportunity claims are from staff applying for promotion to Level C. 70% of applicants to Level C claim achievement relative to opportunity consideration. Women applying for promotion to Level C are twice as likely to claim achievement relative to opportunity as men. It is also interesting to note that in 2018 all of the female applicants for promotion to Level C claimed achievement relative to opportunity, and only one applicant did not make an achievement relative to opportunity claim in 2019.

Figure 6: Types of achievement relative to opportunity circumstances claimed

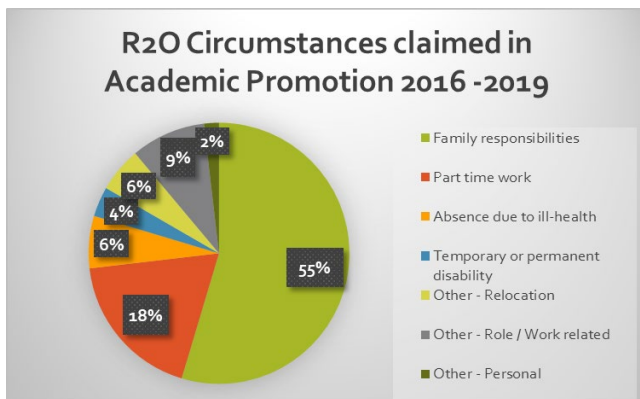
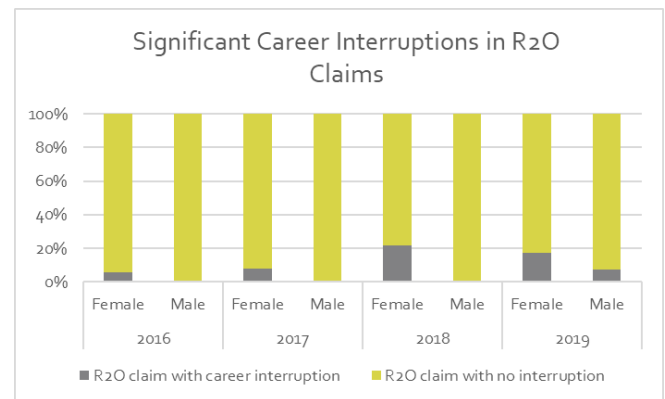


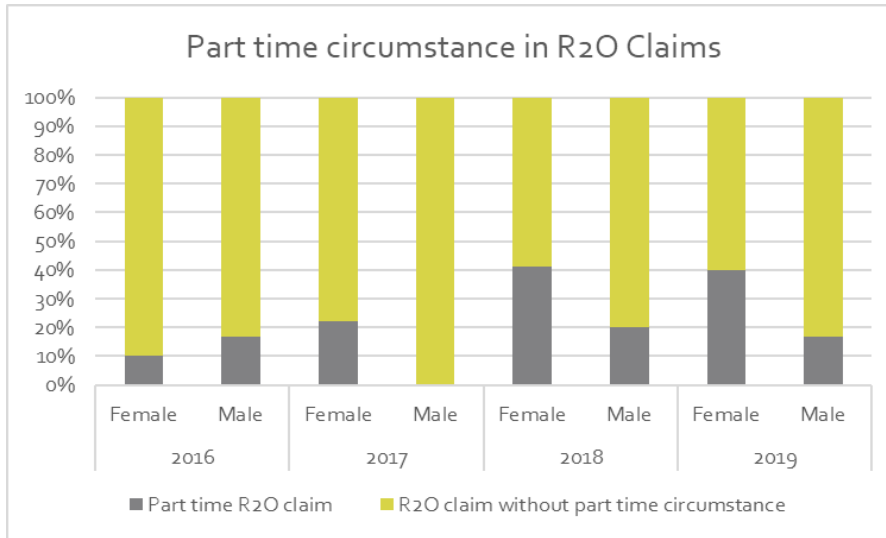
Figure 7: Percentage of significant career interruption circumstances in achievement relative to opportunity claims.



Over half of academic promotion applicants claiming achievement relative to opportunity indicate family responsibilities as a relevant circumstance. There is a low number of applicants claiming achievement relative to opportunity who have significant career interruptions¹⁰ during the period of time which the academic promotions committee assesses. Eight percent (12 individuals) of total achievement relative to opportunity claimants have significant career interruptions (11 Females, 1 Male). Nine applicants were applying for Level C, and three applying for Level D.

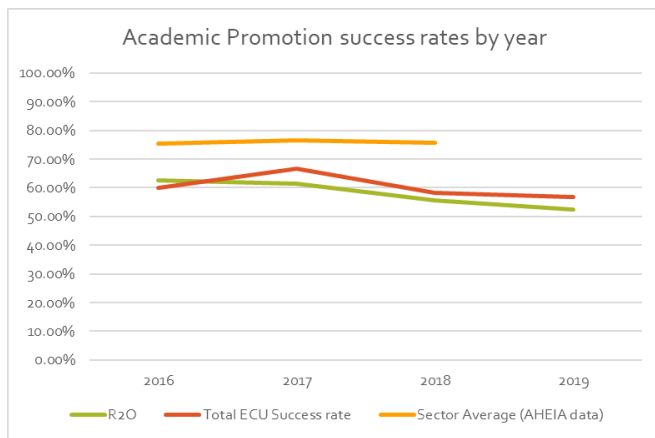
¹⁰ Career interruption is considered as an alteration or cessation of an individual's normal work activities. For the purposes of this paper, significant career interruption is considered alteration or cessation (absence from normal work activities) for three months or more.

Figure 8: Percentage of part time circumstances in achievement relative to opportunity claims.



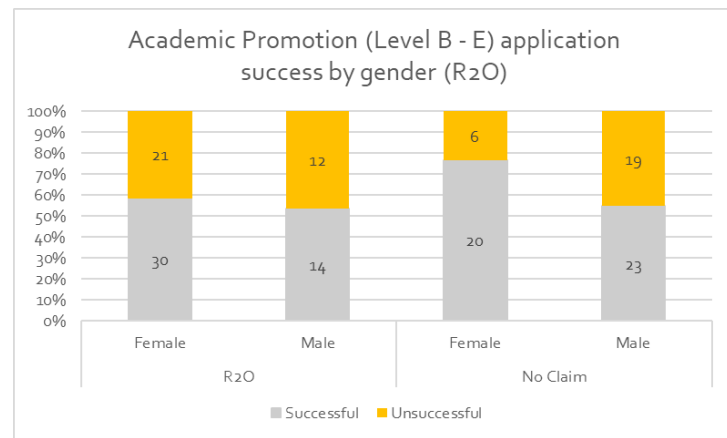
Twenty individuals (16 Females, 4 Males) indicated part time circumstances as part of their achievement relative to opportunity claim. Again, the concentration of part time claims is in applications for Level C (13 individuals), with fewer numbers in applications for Level D (4) and Level B (3).

Figure 9: Academic Staff Promotion success rate by year.



The success rate for academic promotion applicants who claim achievement relative to opportunity is similar to the overall ECU success rate, suggesting that there is no inherent advantage or disadvantage in claiming achievement relative to opportunity.

Figure 10: Academic Staff Promotion success rate by gender.



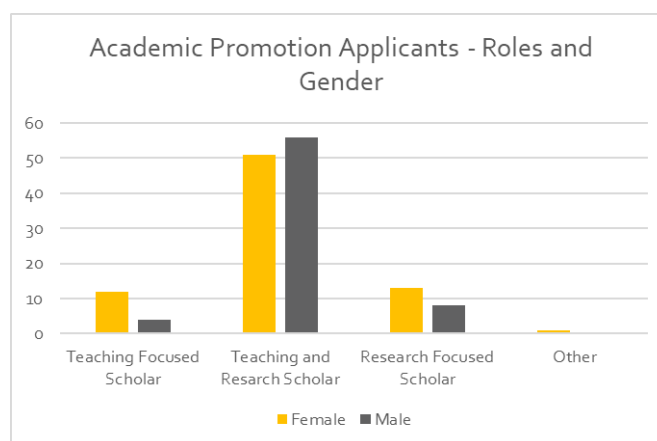
The success rate by gender data indicates that female academic promotion applicants have higher success rates than men, particularly female applicants who have not claimed achievement relative to opportunity.

Gender equity in achievement relative to opportunity

Based on the above data, women (and particularly mid-career women) are more likely to request that their career achievements to be measured in light of the personal responsibilities or circumstances that directly limit their participation and advancement. Family responsibilities represent over half of the achievement relative to

opportunity circumstances claimed, which aligns with the traditional mid-life caring responsibilities that many women experience. It is noteworthy that although 77 individuals claimed consideration, only 12 individuals had significant career interruptions, and 20 participated in part time work. 31 individuals (19 Females, 12 Males) claimed achievement relative to opportunity consideration for family responsibilities but gave no indication of significant career interruption, part time work, disability or absence due to ill health. Given that 40% of all achievement relative to opportunity claimants have not had any extended period of absence from the workplace, part time work, or other reasonable factor impacting career progression, it is evident that a clear and robust statement on what is eligible to be claimed (and what is not) at ECU needs to be developed, communicated and broadly understood by the ECU community.

Figure 9: Academic Role and Gender of Academic Promotion Applicants 2016 – 2019



The academic promotions data also supports information sourced through Athena SWAN activities highlighting that women are less likely to be in ‘traditional’ academic roles (see Figure 9). ‘Traditional’ academic work typically encompasses full-time activities balanced across research and teaching, and a smaller component of university service. In addition to being more likely in part-time work arrangements or have career interruptions, women are also more likely to be in teaching focused roles, which are perceived as having a “truncated career path”¹¹. Significant work has been done in developing and communicating the teaching focused career path, and in 2019 two teaching focused scholars were appointed to Level D. To further shift barriers created by legacies of traditional and mainstream approaches to the assessment of achievement, many of which are based on quantity and rate, assessment based on quality and achievement relative to opportunity is essential.

Influences on academic staff assessment processes

When considering how the principle of achievement relative to opportunity can be embedded in all academic staff assessment processes, consideration needs to be given to how many individuals have input into each process.

The human resources-based academic staff assessment processes at ECU in which the principle may be embedded include:

- Staff recruitment and selection;
- Academic staff probation;
- Performance review and development (MPS);
- Academic staff promotion;
- Academic study leave;
- Vice-Chancellor’s Staff Excellence Awards.

Appendix 1 illustrates the touch points where individuals or groups (panels, committees) assess an individual in these processes. Any of these touch points may be influenced by biases based on characteristics or career choices (e.g. gender, discipline, career stage, academic role, career path).

¹¹Edith Cowan University [ECU], 2018. [ECU Athena SWAN Institution Application Bronze Award](#), p. 39

To ensure that the principle of achievement relative to opportunity is fairly and consistently applied in all of these processes, a clear and robust statement on the principle and its application needs to be communicated to all participants in ECU's academic staff assessment processes.

Appendix 2 outlines emerging good practice in transparent and equitable academic staff assessment.

Consultation timeframes

HRSC will consult with the ECU community through:

- meetings with stakeholder groups such as Associate Deans and the ECU Athena SWAN Charter Committee;
- individual [feedback forms](#);
- individual written submissions (via email to Cass Marie-Soong, Senior HR Policy Adviser, HRSC c.marie-soong@ecu.edu.au).

The consultation period will run until 3 July 2020.

Focus Questions

The following questions are posed to the university community on how ECU's future approach to the principle of achievement relative to opportunity.

1. ECU currently applies the principle of achievement relative to opportunity for academic promotion. What are the benefits / challenges of applying the principle of achievement relative to opportunity across all academic staff assessment processes?
2. ECU currently has a broad approach to achievement relative to opportunity, and hence there is a significant number of claims under 'family responsibilities' in academic promotion. Should the criteria for 'family responsibilities' claims be strengthened so that claims can only be made by those who have had significant career interruption (reduction in work hours or absence from normal work activities for three months or more)?
3. The original purpose of the relative to opportunity principle was to address disadvantage as a result of specific societal or cultural roles and norms that had a long-term negative impact on career progression (e.g. carer roles). Should individuals be able to claim this principle be applied to career-related circumstances and choices that do not disadvantage a particular cohort of applicants on a sustained basis (e.g. establishing a new course, shifting between industry and academe, immigration status impacting on research grant eligibility)?
4. If all academic staff assessment activities are based on the principle of achievement relative to opportunity, what resources and training would best support in understanding and applying the principle?
5. Many individuals claiming achievement relative to opportunity in academic promotion processes disclose personal information that then forms part of their promotion application. These applications may be viewed by line managers, referees, external assessors and committee members. Is there a way in which individuals can make a claim without disclosing personal information to such a wide group?
6. Do you know of any practical tools to better support equity in academic staff assessment?

References

Australian Research Council (2014). *Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence (ROPE) Statement*. Retrieved from Australian Research Council website: <https://www.arc.gov.au/policies-strategies/policy/arc-research-opportunity-and-performance-evidence-rope-statement>

Edith Cowan University (2018). *Athena SWAN Institutional Bronze Award Application*. Retrieved from Edith Cowan University website: https://www.sciencegenderequity.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Edith-Cowan-University_SAGE_AthenaSWAN-Institution-Application_Bronze-Award.pdf

Edith Cowan University (2018). *Academic Staff Performance Expectations and Outcomes Framework*. Retrieved from the Edith Cowan University website: <https://intranet.ecu.edu.au/staff/centres/human-resources-service/our-services/performance-recognition-and-career-development/managing-your-performance/related-content/see-also/academic-staff-performance-expectations-and-outcomes-aspeo-framework>

Group of Eight HR Directors Staff Equity Subcommittee (2010) *Consideration of Merit Relative to Opportunity in Employment-Related Decisions*. Retrieved from the University of Western Australia website: https://www.web.uwa.edu.au/_data/assets/rtf_file/0008/2247623/ConsiderationofMeritRelativetoOpportunityinEmploymentRelatedDecisions.rtf

Suggested Reading

Australian Academy of Science (2019). *Women in STEM Decadal Plan*. Retrieved from the Australian Academy of Science website: <https://www.science.org.au/files/userfiles/support/reports-and-plans/2019/gender-diversity-stem/women-in-STEM-decadal-plan-final.pdf>

Bhalla, N. (2019). *Strategies to improve equity in faculty hiring*. *Molecular Biology of the Cell*, 30 (22), 2737 - 2857

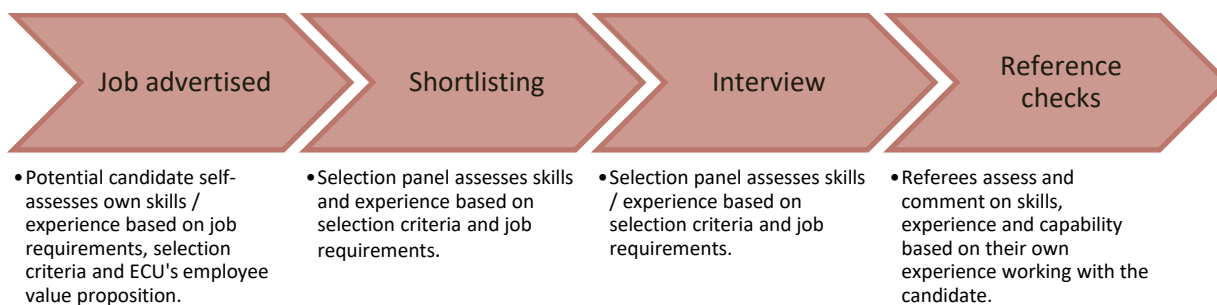
Klocker, N. & Drozdowski, D. (2012). *Career progress relative to opportunity: how many papers is a baby 'worth'?* *Environment And Planning A*, 44 (6), 1271-1277

APPENDIX 1 - Influences on academic staff assessment processes

The diagrams below illustrate the touch points where individuals or groups (panels, committees) assess an individual in these processes. Any of these touch points may be influenced by biases based on characteristics or career choices (e.g. gender, discipline, career stage, academic role, career path). To ensure consistency in applying achievement relative to opportunity in these processes, all participants involved in assessment will need to have a good understanding of ECU's approach to achievement relative to opportunity.

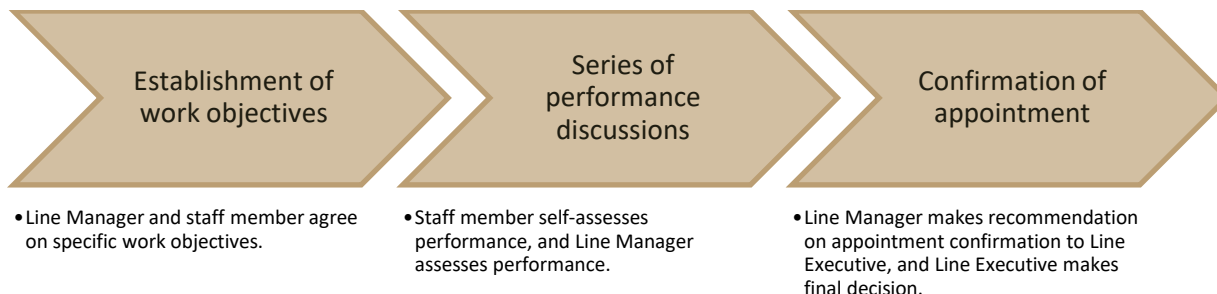
Recruitment and Selection

There are four assessment touch points which may be influenced by individuals or a group.
Assessors: candidate (self-assessment), selection panel members, referees.



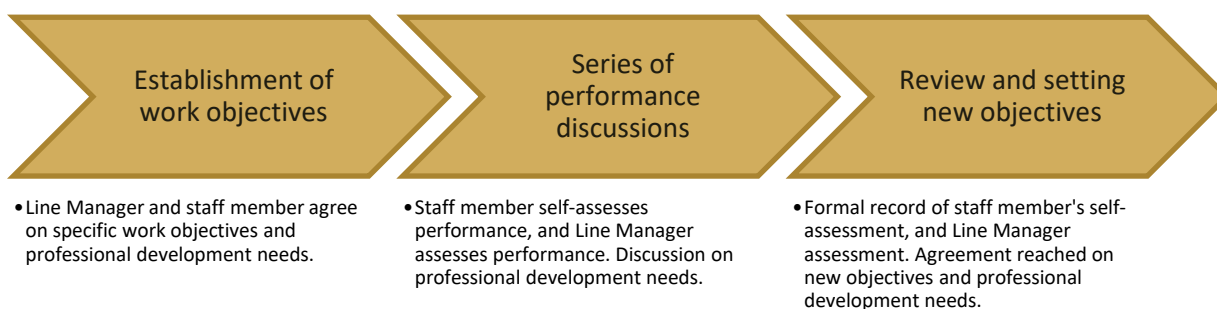
Academic Staff Probation

There are multiple assessment touch points which may be influenced by individuals.
Assessors: staff member (self-assessment), Line Manager, Line Executive.



Performance review and development (MPS)

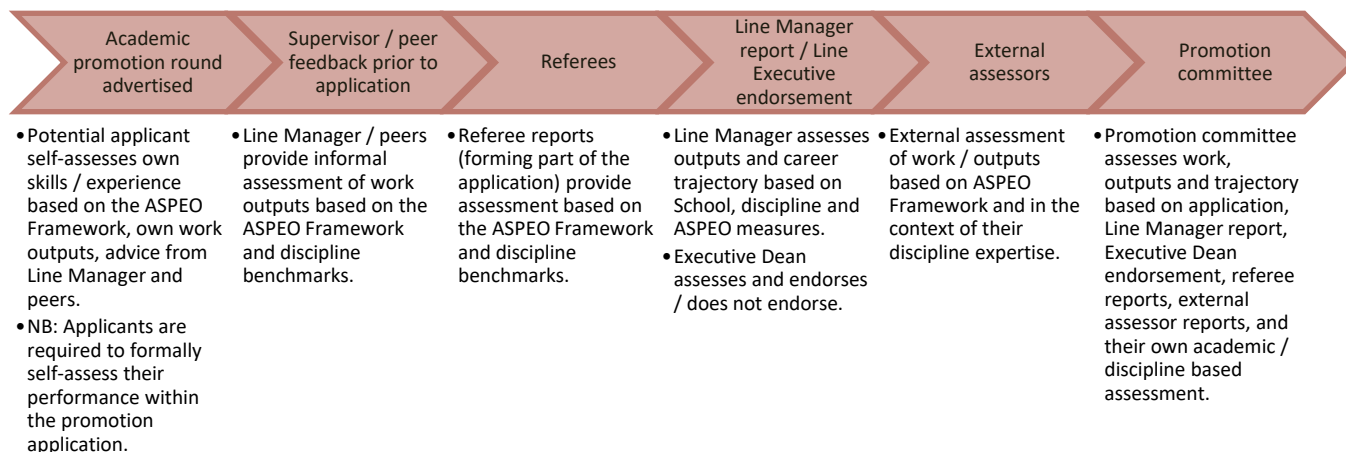
There are multiple assessment touch points which may be influenced by individuals.
Assessors: staff member (self-assessment), Line Manager.



Academic Staff Promotion

There are six touch points which may be influenced by individuals or a group.

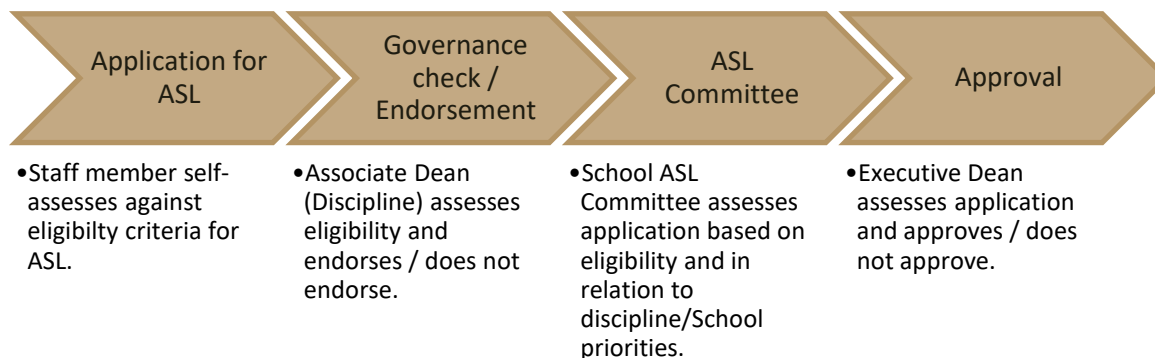
Assessors: staff member (self-assessment), peers (informally), Line Manager, Line Executive, referees, external assessors, promotions committee.



Academic Study Leave

There are four touch points which may be influenced by individuals or a group.

Assessors: staff member (self-assessment), Line Manager (Associate Dean (Discipline) or Executive Dean), School Academic Study Leave Committee.



Vice-Chancellor's Staff Excellence Awards

There is variation between nomination and supportive reference processes for awards under the Vice-Chancellor's Staff Excellence Awards program, however all awards go through a committee-based selection process.

APPENDIX 2 – Emerging international good practice

‘Academic Age’ Calculation

Berlin Institute of Health / Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin

Calculate an individual's ‘academic age’ to assist committees in assessing the length of an individual's academic career.

The calculation is based on:

- Year of each university qualification;
- Year of PhD qualification;
- Number of months for parental leave and/or breastfeeding.

Based on the information provided, ‘academic age’ is calculated as “Current year” minus “Year of first qualification” minus “Number of months for parental leave and/or breastfeeding”.

Equity support for Faculty Search Committees

University of California, Berkley

A comprehensive [online resource](#) for recruitment and selection committees on how to advance diversity, equity and inclusion.

Narrative CV

Dutch Research Council (NWO)

The Dutch Research Council is piloting a [narrative CV format in the Veni scheme](#) (major early career researcher funding program). The narrative format only has two sections – academic profile and key output. The narrative therefore focuses on the individual's research quality, motivation and impact, minimizes focus on quantity and restricts use of metrics.

The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment ([DORA](#))

An initiative to advance practical and robust approaches to research assessment globally and across all scholarly disciplines. Sponsored by the American Society for Cell Biology.