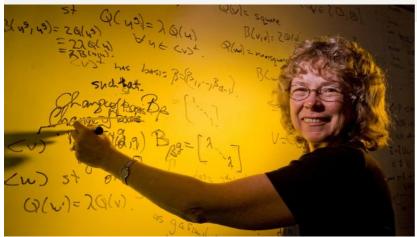
THE AUSTRALIAN

Sydney's female maths professors welcomed but inequality remains

TESSA AKERMAN | THE AUSTRALIAN| FEBRUARY 24, 2016 12:00AM



Cheryl Praeger, professor of mathematics at the University of Western Australia

The appointment of four female mathematics professors at the University of Sydney is "extraordinary" and something to celebrate, but it does not signify gender equality in the sector, says a leading mathematician.

Cheryl Praeger, from the University of Western Australia, was appointed as only the second female professor of mathematics in 1983, following in the footsteps of Hanna Neumann.

"It's definitely wonderful to have a few more women around Australia at that level in universities," she said.

Professor Praeger said it gave women something to aspire to, even though they were still behind in comparison with men.

In 2014, women accounted for 9 per cent of mathematics professorships across Australia — a grand total of 11.

"You have to celebrate success," Professor Praeger said. "Girls need to know that it's possible and that if they choose to stay in a mathematical career, they're not going to be the sole woman in a huge environment of men. It's still going to be male dominated, though."

She said it would be nice if there was no need for groups such as the Women in Mathematics Special Interest Group.

"I would love a time where you wouldn't even think about having such a group because there would be equal access and equal support and equal numbers and equal everything for men and women," Professor Praeger said.

Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute director Geoff Prince said the appointments at the University of Sydney were not only cause for celebration but also a call to action.

"I would like to think that mathematics is aggressively pursuing more senior female positions in universities," he said.

However, he said it was not only a lack of women's representation in the professoriate that was concerning at the university level.

Figures from AMSI show the number of women participating in an honours program in mathematical sciences in 2014 was 44, or 24 per cent of the total number of students. It was only a small improvement on 30 years ago when 24 women were studying honours — or 21 per cent of the total.

However, the percentage of women undertaking PhDs in mathematical sciences has been steadily increasing. In 2014, 33 per cent of the students were women, or 42 of the 127 students. In 1984 there was one female PhD student among the 33 participants.

Professor Prince said the situation had gradually improved over a long period in the mathematical sciences but it was not a uniform improvement. "Some of the small, newer universities and technical universities like RMIT and UTS (University of Technology Sydney) have a better record of female enrolments in honours and PhDs than the older universities," he said.

"It's not the fault of the older universities, it comes down to where they're getting their students from in the first place."

He said while 82 per cent of Year 12 students studied maths, twice as many boys as girls studied advanced high school maths.

"That advanced subject is the de facto leader to engineering, physics, maths etc at universities, especially at the Group of Eight," he said.

Professor Prince said there was something about the way maths was delivered at schools and the number of schools that delivered it that skewed the number of women who studied maths at university.

"We know that in all girl schools, advanced maths is less likely to be offered than in other schools," he said.

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