EQUALITY AT **WORK**

→ Building cultures of **inclusion and belonging** in a new era of organisational accountability

THE **EQUALITY INSTITUTE**

Content note: This paper discusses workplace discrimination and violence against women. If you are affected by these issues and would like some support, please see the resources at the end of this document.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Equality Institute (EQI) acknowledges the ongoing leadership role of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities in preventing violence against women throughout Australia.

Indigenous people's generosity, hope, and ongoing efforts to prevent violence inspires us. We are committed to listening, learning, and doing this work alongside each other with humility, perseverance, and open hearts and minds. It is our hope that we can be a contributor to a future that is just and free from violence for communities everywhere.

EQI was founded in Naarm (Melbourne, Australia) on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country. We pay our respects to the Traditional Owners of this land and waterways, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people, as well as their elders, past, present, and emerging. We also pay our respects to the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia and acknowledge Traditional Custodians of the lands where EQI works around the world. The land we live, work, and play on, always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.[1]

[1] This Acknowledgement of Country was developed based on Hopeful, Together, Strong: Principles of good practice to prevent violence against women in the Northern Territory by Chay Brown (The Equality Institute) and the Central Australian Minimum Standards for the Men's Behaviour Change Programs by Chay Brown (The Equality Institute) and Maree Corbo (The Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention)

The Equality Institute would also like to thank those who generously gave their time, experience, and expertise to review our Acknowledgement of Country. We are very grateful for your insights and for helping us learn.

- Julieanne Axford, Gail Smith, and colleagues from the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation.
- Shirleen Campbell and Carmel Simpson from the Tangentyere Women's Family Safety Group.
- Sharon Meagher from the South Australian Department of Health and Wellbeing, Centre for Education and Training at the Women's and Children's Health Network.
- Minda Murray from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- Hannah Taylor from 1800 RESPECT.

WE ARE IN AN *INCREDIBLE MOMENT* OF CHANGE...

OF CHANGE...

OF CHANGE...

OF CHANGE...

It's 2023, and I've been reflecting on the remarkable few years we've been living through. There's been the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent lockdowns, which have impacted women and gender-diverse people especially, and led many to reflect on the degree to which their work truly aligns with their values and priorities.[i]

We've seen moments of incredible courage, honesty and resilience, with movements like #metoo and Black Lives Matter growing to become global calls to action. Here in Australia, brave and prominent advocacy has drawn renewed attention to sexual abuse and harassment. The Respect@Work bill has passed, and there's a new political mandate for action and accountability on gender equality.

The last few years have changed our society, our workplaces, and ourselves, *for good*.

When I founded The Equality Institute nearly eight years ago, I did so because I truly believe we need more people and organisations working from a creative, intersectional, and values-led perspective to create a safer and more equal world. I could *never* have predicted the upheaval of the last few years, but it seems this simple idea could not be more relevant to us today.

Today's workplaces are facing pressure from all angles and are being called to rise to the challenge of confronting inequality at work.

Navigating this current period of change can feel daunting. But we've learnt, from years of supporting leaders, individuals and organisations in this area, that addressing the root causes of these issues through brave conversations and meaningful solutions will always resonate. This is complex, long-term work, but the first steps can be simple. This White Paper captures the best thinking from across our organisation to explore what an intersectional, values-led, and evidence-based approach to achieving equality in our workplaces looks like in this current moment.

People sometimes ask me if I feel depressed by the work I do, working day in, day out, to advance gender equality and end violence against women and girls. Sometimes, I can feel heartbroken by the enormity of the challenge. But for the most part, I feel hopeful and optimistic. I think we're on the cusp of a huge opportunity, and it's exciting to be working for positive change at this incredible moment in time. Wherever you are on your journey, I hope you'll also see not just the challenges, but the opportunities, of committing to a more inclusive, diverse and *joyful* workplace for all. And I'm delighted you've picked up this paper, to accompany you on that journey.

Emma

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Dr Emma Fulu

FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
THE EQUALITY INSTITUTE

CHANGE IS HERE.

When it comes to the issue of equality in our workplaces, the past few years have been a period of rapid change.

Terms like 'unconscious/implicit bias'[ii] were relegated purely to academic circles as little as ten years ago. Now, you hear them often in social contexts. The term 'psychological safety'[iii] was once only used in academic journals, and now C-suite executives discuss its importance. There are now *some*[iv] high-profile women chief executives, and worldwide, representation of people with diverse identities seems to be increasing.

And yet, this change has also brought with it renewed resistance and backlash from some. For many others, there's confusion, anxiety and overwhelm, perhaps even fear, as we all learn to navigate this new reality. Far from being dismissed as issues to be dealt with in private, these shifts have been converging in the world of work. As Deloitte observes, "Workplaces have emerged as a venue in which disparate pressures have manifested and become much discussed. Caught in the middle, workplace leaders around the world tell us that they feel ill-equipped to navigate these swirling waters."[v]

Shareholders, employees, staff, regulators, voters and customers are becoming attuned to so-called 'diversity-washing'; performative diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) measures which make organisations *appear* to be taking action but lack substantive impact.

In a recent study, 39% of all respondents say they have turned down or decided not to pursue a job because of a perceived lack of equality and inclusion at an organisation.[vi]

LGBTIQ+ and racial or ethnic-minority respondents were more likely still,[vii] and when we look to Gen Z, who have just joined the workforce, that number grows to 77%.[viii] The conversation is shifting. People have been doing deep work over these past years and are looking for cold, hard evidence that employers actually deliver on DEI.[ix] And rightly so.

Regulators are also shifting their attention to the workplace, demanding that employers pay close attention to DEI and workplace culture, with penalties for non-compliance. In Australia, Victoria's recent Gender Equality Act[x] is just one example. Then there's the question of reputation.

64% of consumers around the world now buy or boycott brands because of their position on a social or environmental issue.[xi]

Customers, shareholders and other external stakeholders have become more active and vocal in demanding organisational change. In the words of Amanda Glasgow, U.S. Chair of Brand at Edelman, "It's no longer a question of whether to, but *how* to take a stand."[xii]

HOW EQUAL ARE AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACES REALLY?
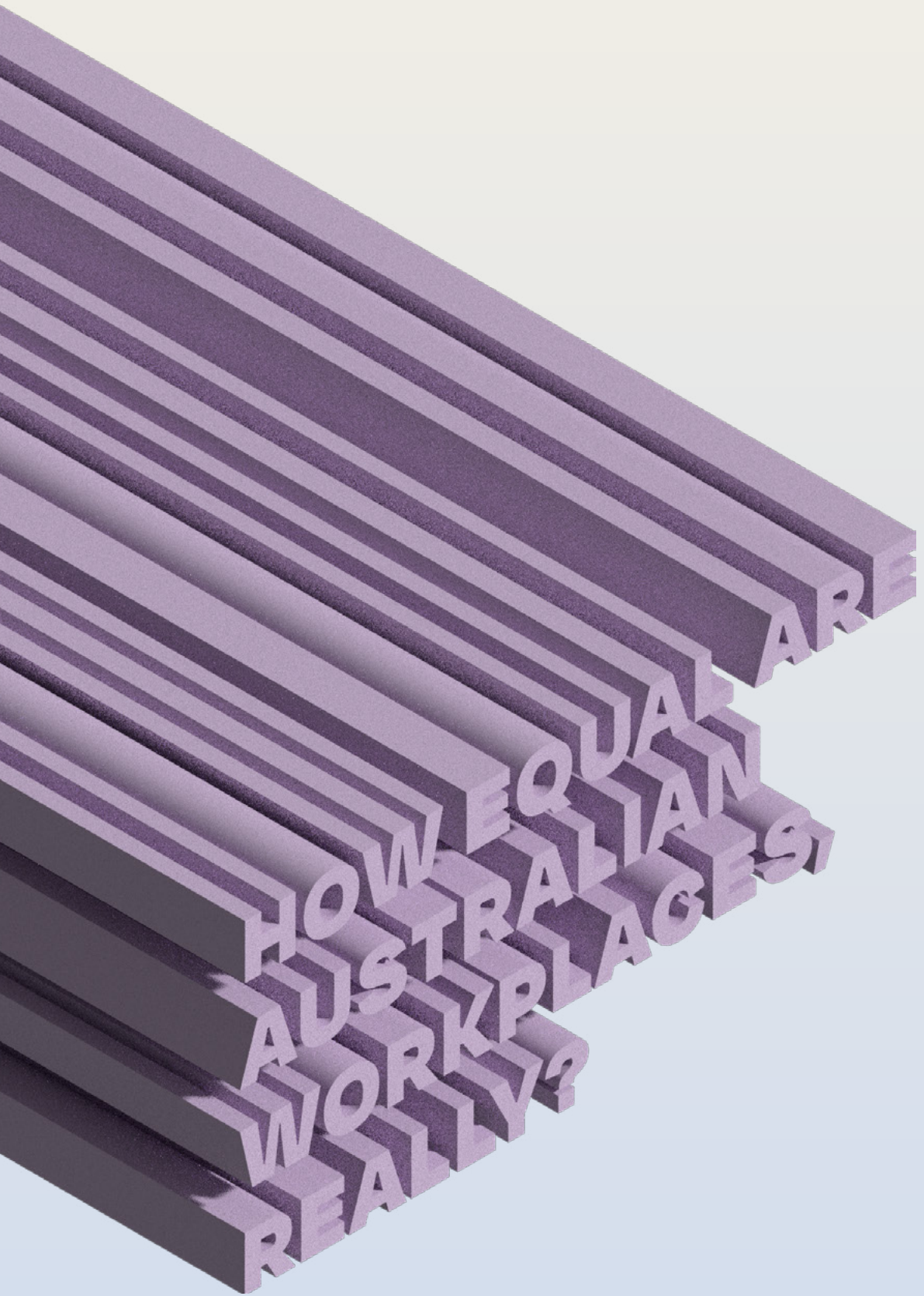
Diversity, equity and inclusion is in the spotlight right now, but regardless of this surge in attention, how much progress have we been making? And what problems remain to be addressed?

The answer is complex.

In spite of some progress, still only 22% of CEOs in Australia are women, and 22% of Australian boards are comprised of only men.[xiii]

One in two women have experienced sexual harassment at work.[xiv] People who also experience other kinds of discrimination and disadvantage, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women living with a disability, people of diverse sexual orientation and young women are *all* more at risk.[xv] In Australia, on average, women *still* earn $13,182 less than men each year[xvi] driven, first and foremost, by discrimination.[xvii] And we *still* don't have national data on the gender pay gap for First Nations women, women of colour, or women with a disability. Gender-diverse people are significantly overrepresented in part-time and casual work, impacting their financial and job security, and career progression.[xviii]

When we look at the lived realities of people experiencing discrimination, the impacts of these inequalities become even more concerning. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised for family-violence related assaults, than non-Indigenous women.[xix] More than 70% of women with disability have been victims of violent sexual encounters at some time in their lives.[xx]

Almost 60% of women of colour in Australian workplaces experience discrimination based on their race and gender,[xxi] and lesbian, bisexual and transgender women are collectively three times more likely to experience depression.[xii]

Women are still far from equal, especially those who are also affected by other forms of discrimination. When it comes to equality at work, in spite of some progress, we still have lots of work to do.

A WAKE-UP CALL FOR LEADERS: MOST DIVERSITY PROGRAMS *ARE FAILING*

There's a hard truth that not everyone is willing to talk about. It's that change, the kind which reaps the benefits and rewards of genuine equality and inclusion, takes real work.

The evidence shows that the issues causing a lack of inclusion, diversity and equity are deep, rooted and embedded in our very culture and society.

Change won't happen overnight, and research shows that in fact *most* organisations will need to transform their cultures, in order to become fully inclusive.[xxiii]

Around the world, DEI efforts remain top priority for workers and leaders,[xxv] but despite increased awareness, spending and public commitment to this issue, most DEI initiatives still fail.[xxvi] The gap between intention and results can come down to many factors. Change is complex and progress is never linear, and DEI initiatives can face backlash from those who benefit from the status quo. Organisations are often without the education and support to analyse and address the issues and frequently underestimate the depth of change required. And on top of all of this, working on these issues often requires more thought, time and effort than other business priorities, and yet, in terms of resourcing, it usually receives far less.

In the face of this, it's common to see organisations adopting performative measures, or seeking to do the minimum through a compliance-oriented approach to diversity and inclusion, rather than committing to deep, ongoing work. This can seem like the easier option, at least in the short term, but without creating strategies to change deeply ingrained beliefs and biases, these activities will fall short of sustained, long-term change. In the words of Harvard Business Review:

"Companies are basically doubling down on the same approaches they've used since the 1960s—which often make things worse, not better."[xxvii]
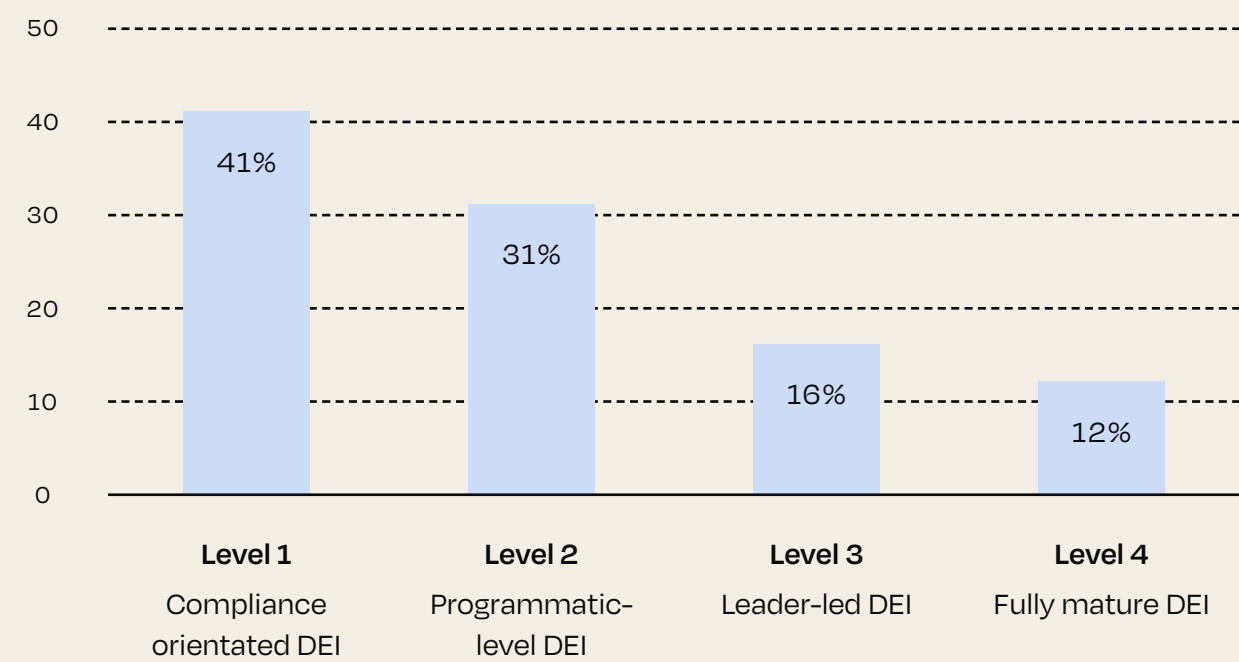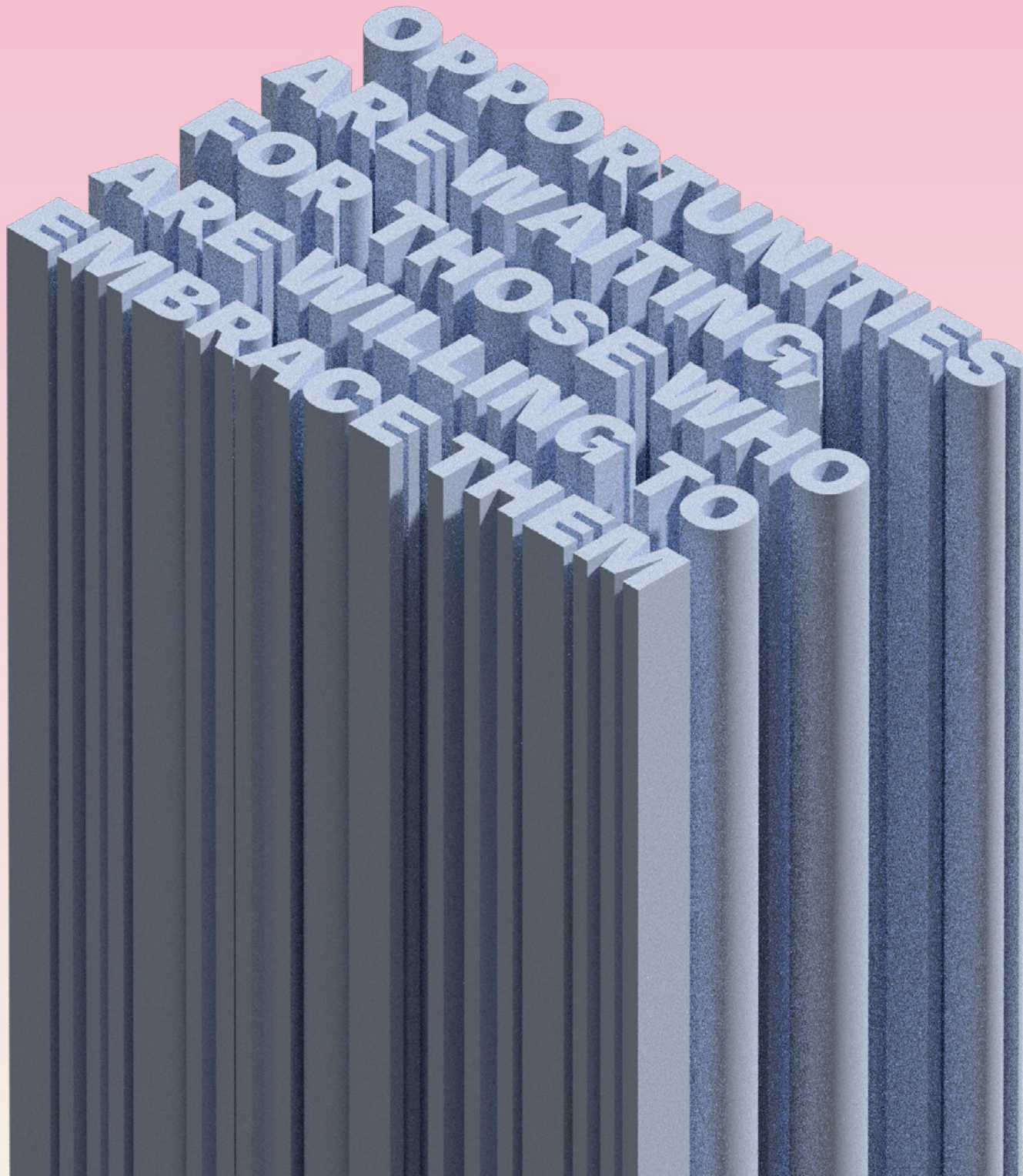

Fig. 1: Only 12% of organisations in a recent study were implementing a fully mature and comprehensive approach to DEI. 41% were still focused on compliance. Source: Deloitte[xxiv]

By now, we're all well aware of the economic and business case for diversity, equity and inclusion, and the large body of evidence that's behind it.

In addition to being the right thing to do, diversity pays dividends. It's been demonstrated to lead to improvements in workplace productivity, innovation and decision making, income and revenue, mental health and well-being, talent acquisition and retention, and much more.[xxviii] Diverse executive teams are 33% more likely to reap financial rewards,[xxix] and diverse teams are 20% more innovative, 70% more likely to capture new markets and 80% better at making decisions.[xxx]

Companies in the top 25% of gender diversity are 25% more

likely to have a higher profit than their peers.

For ethnic and cultural diversity, this number rises to 36%.[xxxi]

In a tough economic climate, DEI initiatives are often the first to go. But here's the thing: these issues are not going away. They are, in fact, only going to become more salient.[xxxii] With workforces and customer bases predicted to become more diverse in coming decades, organisations that meaningfully engage with DEI issues will be better able to attract and retain top talent, launch products that resonate, and continue to innovate, grow and thrive now, and into the future.[xxxiii]

Furthermore, workplaces are hugely influential in shaping our beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. On average, we'll spend about one *third* of our life working, and they can be places where many people begin to think critically about these issues. Isn't that an incredible opportunity to drive positive social change? We think so.

WHAT WILL IT REALLY TAKE TO ACHIEVE EQUALITY AT WORK?

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So, if business-as-usual DEI initiatives are no longer cutting it, what can we do about it?

For that, we recommend going back to the evidence, which shows that these issues are deep and embedded in our very culture and society, requiring similarly deep and long-term solutions. And achieving that, is not *only* the job of people who work in HR or DEI. These issues affect every part of an organisation, and so *everyone* has a role to play.

In the face of increased scrutiny and pressure, it's understandable to feel a sense of urgency. But rather than rushing to implement a suite of poorly designed DEI initiatives because of fear of repercussions, we urge a word of caution. What's required from leaders today is, in our view, an authentic, informed, and action-oriented commitment to begin this journey and take the first steps. On the whole, stakeholders know that these issues are complex. They are not expecting organisations and leaders to achieve perfect solutions, straight away.[xxxiv]

In the face of this maturing conversation, rushing to implement poorly thought through or performative measures, can be almost as risky as taking no action at all.

In our work with organisations, we urge leaders and organisations to first spend time building their internal capacity and cultures, ahead of making bold, outward-facing commitments. This often involves a nuanced, multi-level approach that is based on a deep analysis and understanding of the issues at play in your organisation, and this takes time. However, by planning, and taking committed action on this, you can begin to address the root causes of issues, and achieve lasting change in behaviours and cultures.

"An **intersectional lens** allows you to start asking questions. It lets you ask – *what are the systems we're perpetuating?* What part are we playing in **upholding harmful and unequal systems** that go against our values? To work out - what is our role in this work? *And how can we use what we're learning to decide how to act?"*

Shannon Harmer ─────────────
EQI WORKPLACE GENDER EQUALITY ACT, LEAD

For organisations who are looking to go deeper, here are nine actions to commit to building cultures of equality and inclusion in your workplace:

1 **UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM**

Start here. Begin with clear analysis on where your organisation is at. Undertake a review that considers the strengths of your organisation's approach to DEI, as well as areas of weakness, opportunities, risks and threats. Audit and diagnostic tools can be very useful, especially those designed to go beyond compliance-focused criteria. When used well, they can spark honest conversations on the underlying causes of problems, and better explore how issues of inequality intersect and interact in your workplace.

2 **LEAD AUTHENTICALLY**

As you now know, performative gestures and piecemeal initiatives are simply not good enough, and will increase organisational risk in this new era of workplace accountability. Demonstrated commitment to these issues by leaders, from the CEO and executive level down, is hugely important in setting an example for the whole organisation, but it must be genuine. Leaders should be prepared and willing to discuss the complexities of DEI in a way that is honest, nuanced and authentic. It goes without saying that they should also be role models. Zero tolerance for misconduct around DEI issues should apply to anyone, but it's especially important at a senior level, and will build trust in your commitment to meaningful change.

3 **COMMIT TO BOLD ACTION**

Once you understand the root causes of DEI issues and barriers to inclusion in your organisation, you'll need to commit to actions to correct them. This step can be overwhelming. It's likely you'll have many things to address, but will need to focus your efforts on a few key areas first. Whether that be strengthening your recruitment processes, setting performance targets or KPIs around DEI, building your in-house capacity, or investing in education, the best first steps will look different for every organisation. Just remember, this is long-term work. It's okay if you can't address everything right away. The main thing is to start, and if you've been focusing on understanding the specifics of how advantage and disadvantage play out in your organisation, some clear priorities may already have emerged!

4

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

What you say, and how and when you say it, is important in any process of organisational change, but especially in an area as highly scrutinised as DEI. It's important to ensure you're communicating well, in a way that addresses people's concerns, and promotes cooperation and understanding. This can look like sharing clear, consistent messaging emphasising the benefits of DEI measures to all employees, or articulating a clear business case for why this work, in particular, is relevant for your organisation. Don't be afraid to seek guidance from your DEI team or external advisors on how to communicate these plans and manage change. We genuinely believe that when meaningful internal work has come first, authentic communication will naturally follow, and this means your messaging will have a *much* higher chance of success.

5

BUILD CULTURES OF INCLUSION AND BELONGING, NOT JUST DIVERSITY

Building and maintaining a strong workplace culture is hugely important. What we're working towards is a culture which understands, welcomes, and values differences between people, whether that be race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and more, but also their skill sets, experiences, and other identities. This starts with a strong grounding in psychological safety and trust (all of these steps listed here will contribute to this), but research also shows that individuals' sense of inclusion and belonging at work is influenced by how much they feel like they're accepted in the workplace as their authentic selves.[xxxv] In light of this, ask the question: how can you create spaces which embed subtle signals of togetherness and safety, as opposed to otherness, across your organisation?

6

MEASURE MEANINGFULLY

To be successful, it's important to measure your progress, learn and improve. These days, many organisations track diversity metrics around recruitment selection, and retention, and we're seeing moves to publish these statistics externally. This is great news, and if your organisation doesn't do this, it's absolutely something worth working towards, but here's where it gets tricky. While it's relatively easy to track some quantitative measures of diversity, some of the most valuable insights *actually* lie in measuring shifts in behaviour, attitudes and culture, including shifts in people's sense of safety, inclusivity and belonging, and this can be much harder to track. To really take your work in this area to the next level, consider including DEI in your key performance indicators, as a target with clear expectations and accountability.

7

MAINSTREAM DEI ACROSS YOUR ORGANISATION

DEI and HR teams have a hard job. They're often tasked with the huge undertaking of steering complex cultural change, advocating against entrenched inequalities, managing key areas of organisational risk and achieving ambitious KPIs, all within limited time and resources. Most are doing a great job, but this work cuts across all parts of an organisation, so it can't only be the job of DEI or HR teams alone. It's everyone's job, and it needs commitment, buy-in and action from across your organisation, in an integrated, and coordinated way. Consider working together across departments or teams, and prioritising a collaborative approach to achieving these goals.

8

INVEST IN EDUCATION THAT MEETS PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE AT

DEI, at its heart, is about human belief systems and behaviours. In our experience, growth in this area doesn't happen without at least some form of ongoing education. People are coming to these issues from all kinds of different backgrounds and experiences, so this education needs to be able to meet people where they're at, whilst providing ongoing opportunities to learn and grow. What sets leading DEI education apart is its commitment to go beyond compliance and activity-focused learning. This means focusing on building foundational skills and capacity for empathy, critical thinking, and action in safe environments where people have permission to make mistakes, change, learn and grow. The capabilities of today's learning technologies have grown immensely over recent years, using principles of adult learning and behavioural science. This means expert-driven learning is able to be delivered across different locations in a supported manner, with huge potential to create positive social change, at scale!

9

ENSURE YOU HAVE THE RIGHT SUPPORT

We've said it before, and we'll say it again: you don't need to do this alone. Whether it's investing in an in-house DEI team, or engaging subject-matter experts like us, there are many places you can go for support. Having the right team around you can make all the difference when it comes to driving positive and deep organisational change, and avoiding the many pitfalls and risks that are all too common around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. If you're ever in doubt, don't be afraid to ask for help!

SPOTLIGHT

ONLINE LEARNING AND EDUCATION

CREATING INCLUSIVE CULTURES OF BELONGING, IN ANY LOCATION

Did you know:

- In a recent study, 41% of senior DEI and HR leaders said that inadequate training was the biggest barrier to increasing the effectiveness of DEI in their organisations, and current skills shortages are driving a renewed focus on upskilling existing employees.[xxxvi]

- Other recent surveys showed that DEI teams with high levels of success and maturity in this area are *7 times* more likely to invest in training, and that 85% of such companies train managers to engage deeply with DEI concepts. [xxxvii]

- Due to the rise of remote and hybrid work environments, companies have become increasingly dispersed, more dependent on ever-changing technology, and are adapting to new, dynamic work environments. While the option to work from home may address some aspects of diversity, the creation of strong cultures of inclusion in hybrid settings is emerging as a key challenge.

- Learning and development programs are currently seeing drastic changes and huge flow-on effects to the processes of onboarding, training, and coaching employees. Data-driven online experiences and on-demand learning are becoming more common, and increasingly, experts are recognising that we will need to work hand-in-hand with technology to create strong, inclusive cultures.

- Not every DEI course is created equal. Evidence shows that successful courses go beyond compliance, and focus on inclusive behaviours, empathy and critical thinking skills which can be translated into action in a variety of settings. [xxxviii]
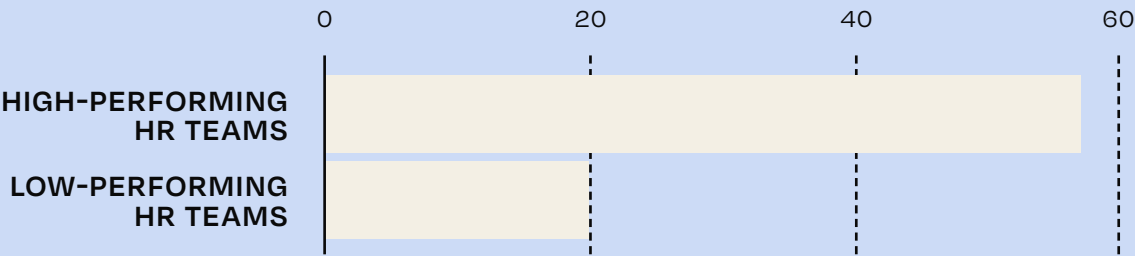
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HIGH-PERFORMING HR TEAMS				
LOW-PERFORMING HR TEAMS				

Fig. 3: In a recent study, 57% of top performing HR teams invest in training programs for reducing bias. Source: Lattice[xxxix]

"When it comes to making *meaningful progress* on DEI, **everyone has a role to play.** Today's learning technologies, and the recent move to hybrid work, has brought with it **huge opportunities to create inclusive cultures** at scale."

Dr Emma Fulu

EQI FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

YOU WERE BORN READY

Conversations about transforming the culture, structure, systems, and values of your organisation can be hard.

And in this time of change and evolution, we're sure you're juggling many priorities. While there is no quick fix or easy answer, we urge you, if you're not already, to take equality seriously in your workplace. Cultural change is absolutely possible and, with the right support, even the most entrenched company cultures can shift in positive ways.

Taking first steps, like investing in education, can provide effective and safe ways for people to learn about these issues, and collaborate and interact with people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, identities, and abilities, creating momentum for wider change.

We know workplaces are hugely important sites for social change, whether that be through the leading role they choose to play, or the barriers they pose to progress.

These issues touch all of us, women, men, and gender-diverse people, and getting equality right, means a workplace where power and opportunities are shared equally; where people can show up as their full human selves; where the diversity of people's lived experiences and perspectives is respected and celebrated; where people are paid fairly and equitably; where the workforce isn't segregated by gender. This will lead to greater innovation, economic prosperity and health and well-being for all. Surely that's something we all want to work towards.

ABOUT US

The Equality Institute (EQI) is a global feminist agency working to advance gender equality and end violence against women and girls.

Our vision is a world in which diversity is celebrated,

all people are respected, and power and resources are shared.

Our purpose is to advance gender equality and support violence prevention efforts to thrive in a rapidly changing world – through research, creative communications, diversity, equity and inclusion support to organisations, e-learning, and global leadership.

EQUALITY AT WORK E-LEARNING

Our evidence-based and feminist-informed e-learning courses are designed by those at the forefront of intersectionality, research, creative communications, feminist leadership and design, to meet learners where they're at.
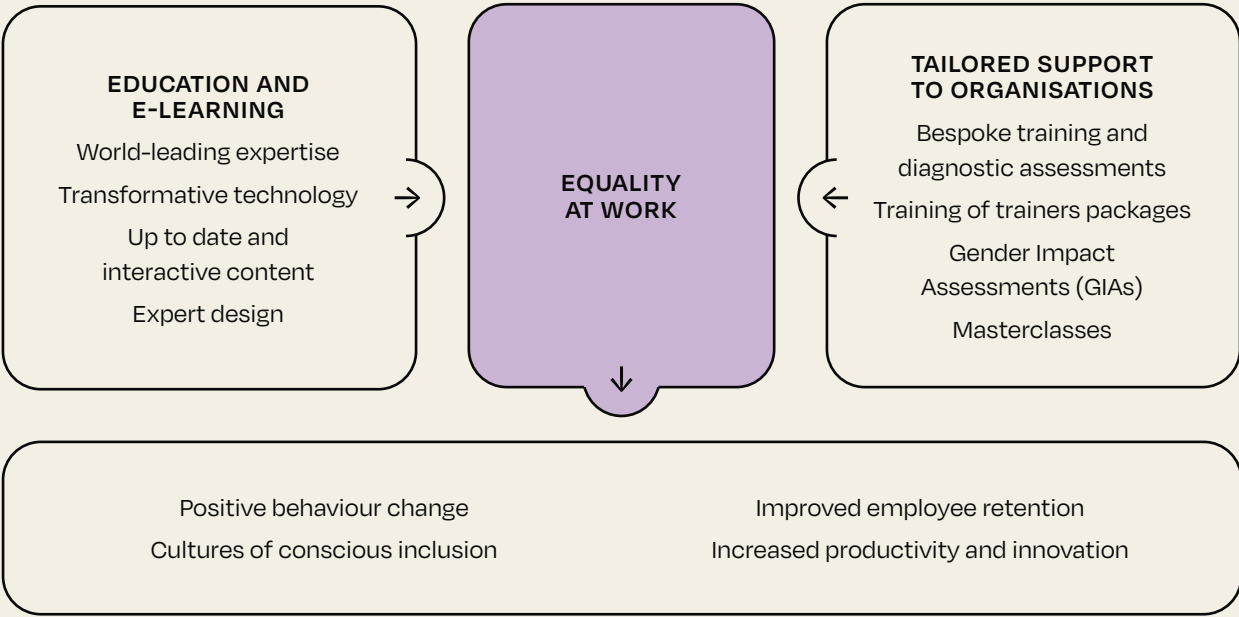
WORKPLACE TRAINING

We provide bespoke support to a range of organisations to advance gender equality in the workplace in compliance with the Gender Equality Act (2020) and beyond. We support corporations, not-for-profits, public entities and all organisations to implement good practice.

→ **FIND OUT MORE: EQUALITYINSTITUTE.ORG/EDUCATION**

HOW WE HELP ORGANISATIONS ACHIEVE EQUALITY AT WORK

EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING

World-leading expertise

Transformative technology

Up to date and interactive content

Expert design

→

EQUALITY AT WORK

TAILORED SUPPORT TO ORGANISATIONS

Bespoke training and diagnostic assessments

Training of trainers packages

Gender Impact Assessments (GIAs)

Masterclasses

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Positive behaviour change

Cultures of conscious inclusion

Improved employee retention

Increased productivity and innovation

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POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

This White Paper was written on behalf of The Equality Institute (EQI), an organisation led from, and largely based in Naarm (Melbourne), Australia on unceded Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country (with some staff based in Dili, Timor-Leste and Mparntwe, Alice Springs). It was written by Katherine Lim (she/her), an Asian-Australian communications and social change professional. As a Woman of Colour who has lived largely on unceded Gadigal/Dharawal land (Sydney) and been educated within a Western system, she has often benefitted from the colonialist dispossession of First Nations peoples, whilst also experiencing impacts of racism and the intergenerational trauma of colonisation. This informs her writing, work, and commitment to decolonisation.

SUPPORT SERVICES

Discussing gender inequality and issues like violence against women may cause distress. If you're feeling affected by this content, please reach out to a support service, such as your workplace's internal support services, or external services.

In Australia, these include:

1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)

Safe Steps (1800 015 188)

Men's referral service (1300 766 491)

Lifeline (13 11 14)

For resources in the Northern Territory, click here.

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