

Prof Kay Latham's EEON speech (Opening)

EEON's 3rd Biennial 2020 Enabling Diversity and Inclusion Summit: Learn Think and Do

15 September 2020 ; 9:10-9:20 am (5-7 minutes)

Wominjeka! Hello everyone. I am Kay Latham, Dean of STEMM Diversity and Inclusion at RMIT University.

Thank you for joining us today for EEON's 3rd Biennial 2020 [Enabling Inclusion & Diversity Summit](#).

I understand that this is the first virtual summit, though I think for most of us we are well-equipped for digital engagement [at this stage of 2020!](#)

[Acknowledgement of Country](#)

As we gather today, from many different homes, I too would like to acknowledge the people of the *Boonwurrung* language group of the Eastern Kulin Nations where I currently work and make my home.

I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands and waters across Australia where you are all dialling in from today and acknowledge their Ancestors and Elders, past and present.

Considering my focus on STEMM, it feels necessary to acknowledge that Indigenous Australians were the [first scientists](#), and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have extraordinary contributions to make in cultural, economic and scientific domains.

In this time when our *Wilam* (meeting place) has changed, I personally feel a strong sense of *Noogal* (belonging) in meeting with you all through alternative and accessible communication methods. And I feel grateful that we can take this time to come together, to share stories and work collaboratively.

For the last 3 years, a large part of my role at RMIT has been leading the Science in Australia Gender Equality (or SAGE) Athena SWAN program, designed to champion gender equality in STEMM fields.

Achieving the Athena SWAN Bronze Award last year involved a rigorous analysis of our University data, and mapping efforts to promote equitable solutions to address our areas of under-representation.

It has involved an intersectional approach, applying a STEM lens to all our diversity and inclusion action plans – [Accessibility for people with disability, LGBTQ+ inclusion, Cultural inclusion and support for our students from Low Socio-Economic backgrounds](#).

We are currently in the midst of preparing [RMIT's Diversity and Inclusion strategies to 2025](#), at a time when a focus on equity and inclusion has become even more crucial to our University operations.

Academic and teaching staff have had a tough time - moving all of their teaching online virtually overnight, managing the challenges of competitive research, while supporting their students through periods of uncertainty and anxiety. [And](#) managing all of this in the same space where they [too](#) are managing personal and caring responsibilities.

Referring to COVID as *"the great equaliser"* has become a common phrase, but we know this is far from true. [COVID, and the economic and caring crisis that have resulted, has only served to highlight previous inequities.](#)

As a scientist, I have seen from personal experience that in STEM fields, *talent is talent*. And it is a missed opportunity for Australia and in science if we do not include a diverse opinion, or do not enable different ways to work.

Science has given me a very creative and rewarding career and allowed me to participate at an international level but [studying science](#) has also been quite [lonely](#) at times.

All of my female friends at school chose to study English or languages or history. All of a sudden, I was thrown into this *'masculine'* world. At best there was one other girl in the class.... and so it has remained for decades. For the most part I accepted this was my lot – [the norm](#), and I got on with it, but there have been moments within my career where I have completely lost my confidence or wondered if I was going to be 'allowed' to pursue my dream or even just survive.

The messages were mixed:

'you can do anything you want to do as long as you apply yourself'

'well Kay, do you want a family or a career?'

'why do you want to be a pharmacist ?, you'll end up working in a shop'

Pearls of wisdom from my school career's teacher.

This, added to the fact my parents were telling me '*university is not for you*', caused me to drop out of school at 17 and find a job.

I have re-invented myself many times throughout my working life, finding an alternate pathway to being what I wanted to be, or occasionally taking some down-time to re-group.

- when I left school for that first job (a technician in a paint company), I went to College and Uni on day-release and night-school for 7 years until I got my first-class degree
- when I kept getting passed over for a research fellowship post PhD, I took a year out to temp as an Executive Assistant because I just needed to earn some money and feel valued for a while,
- to get an academic position I left everything that was familiar to me in the UK and travelled to the other side of the world,
- and when a senior colleague in Australia told my newly-formed industry contact that they had to choose between him or me to pursue their research partnership (*they chose him*) – I changed my field of research and never worked with him or that company again.

It's been a hard slog, and lessons were learned at every stage, but I still didn't really see what was happening.

I thought all of these obstacles/events were *personal to me*. Nothing to do with my gender, or the fact that I didn't go to the right schools or have the right 'breeding'. Then I got involved with the Athena SWAN program at RMIT.

Now I know what I know, *I cannot un-see these things*. It's 40 years since I was told at school, *I could be anything I wanted to be* and still inequality is rife – *gender, race, physical/neuro-capability, sexuality, age*, all these things stack up against people achieving their best or even having the opportunity to try, and COVID has only served to highlight how unfair life can be.

In my new role, and with the excellent partnership I have with our leaders and the University's D&I team, every day I press for change, highlight inequalities, put forward new approaches and strategies to address them, or even try to get in front of them before they happen.

I keep diversity and inclusion, particularly in STEMM, on the agenda – *figuratively and in reality*.

So, where are we now?

I think there's a real hunger for change, and we are making progress, but the advice I give our students and early-career staff is that: *'if it feels wrong – speak out... do not be accepting of any injustice,'* but at the same time I counter this with *'we are on a journey we haven't fixed things yet so you may need a good dose of resilience to hang on in there while we change'*.

Society is different from when I started out. Younger women and men **both** expect a career **and** expect to participate fully in family life. We now see far more men taking up parental leave while their partner goes back to work, or they share and share about – it's a much healthier approach and we will be called to account to create more flexibility and choice to enable this demand.

In closing...

Our role at RMIT is to *remove barriers and smash stereotypes*.

To do this, we know we have to do many things, including attracting and retaining staff and students from a much wider talent pool.

This is why RMIT engaged in the Athena SWAN initiative. The work in the initiative has subsequently led to our STEMM fields role-modelling inclusion efforts for other academic areas of the University.

We recognise that our staff and students need to be involved in understanding the causal factors of inequity, to create a discourse and to dig deep into recognizing unconscious and conscious biases.

We value that the ways to meaningful and lasting change across the sector are through partnership with committed leaders in the STEMM community with industry, schools, peak bodies and organisations. So, I am thrilled to welcome you all to this conference today as we come together to progress this work.