

Beyond the Rhetoric: The Practice of Affirmative Action in Australia

*A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the University of New England*

by

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Declaration

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all the sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



Abstract

In 1986 the *Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act* was passed by the Australian federal government to address the problem of inequality of employment opportunity for women in Australia. Equal employment opportunity was the stated goal of the legislation and affirmative action was the name given to the interventionary practices designed to achieve the goal. Organisations covered by the legislation are required to implement affirmative action programs and report to the Affirmative Action Agency annually, outlining their programs.

This thesis explores the ‘practice’ of affirmative action from two major perspectives. The first perspective involves a description of the types of affirmative action policies that organisations covered by the legislation reported to the Affirmative Action Agency. In the absence of a descriptive typology of affirmative action policies in Australia, one was developed which distinguished among five types of affirmative action policies — ‘temperamental’, ‘work & family’, ‘non-traditional’, ‘social structural’ and ‘opportunities’. This typology was then used to classify the affirmative action policies of 288 organisations with well developed affirmative action programs in place. The most commonly reported policies were ‘social structural’; that is, policies seeking to ensure personnel practices within the organisations were non-discriminatory. Policies which challenged the ‘traditional order’ within organisations (that is, ‘non-traditional’ and ‘opportunities’ policies) were less common than those primarily concerned with removing discriminatory practices.

In the second part of the thesis, the ‘practice’ of affirmative action was examined in three organisations which were, by standards set by the Affirmative Action Agency, ‘exemplary’ performers in affirmative action. The focus of this part of the thesis was on how employees within these organisations perceived the affirmative action programs in place in their organisations, and their employment opportunities.

The findings from interviews and subsequent surveys of employees suggest that despite the various efforts of these companies to create an environment in which women and men enjoy the same employment opportunities, the goal has yet to be fully achieved. A significant percentage of women perceived their employment opportunities to be somewhat less than those of men and that the employment processes were not 'fair'. This suggests that the promise of affirmative action has yet to be fulfilled; the practice has not matched the rhetoric. From the insights gained from employees' perceptions of affirmative action and their work environments and consideration of the pertinent literature, some strategies for enhancing the practice of affirmative action are canvassed.

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