

The Effects of Affirmative Action for Women in Male-Dominated STEM fields at University

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Overview

- ▶ Aim: to examine the effects of an affirmative action program aimed at increasing female representation in male-dominated fields (engineering and IT) at a major Australian university
- ▶ Affirmative action program: extra 10 points to female applicants ATAR in targeted degrees, introduced in 2020
- ▶ Quasi-experimental evaluation design, dataset covering all the applications and admission offers at this and a neighbouring university 4 years before and 2 years after implementation
- ▶ Focus: impact on students' applications and the university's admission offers

Results

- ▶ No behavioural responses on students' applications but mechanical effects on admission offers
- ▶ Increase in admission offers to women with lower unadjusted scores
- ▶ The additional women with admission offers are from relatively advantaged socioeconomic background: due to interaction with other programs (adjustment points already allocated to applicants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and limit on total number of adjustment points)
- ▶ Decrease in admission offers to men: due to caps on offers if oversubscribed degrees

Key takeaways

- ▶ The public debate on affirmative action policies may overstate the behavioral effects of such policies
- ▶ Affirmative action policies can have unintended consequences on other groups

General comments

- ▶ Relevant policy topic
- ▶ Competent empirical analysis
- ▶ Clearly stated research question and results

Limitations/opportunities for further research

- ▶ Unfortunately the analysis is limited to students' applications and university offers, unable to track enrolments
- ▶ More generally, one would like to track completions and examine whether the affirmative action policy increases the number/proportion of female graduates in targeted degrees
- ▶ Potential negative unintended consequence of the particular affirmative action policy if admission of lower ATAR applicants results in fewer completions
- ▶ But also potential for positive dynamic behavioral effects if more female graduates today implies more female applications in the future

The big picture

- ▶ Affirmative action policies are typically justified on fairness grounds (rectify entrenched disadvantages) but also on efficiency grounds (by removing barriers to underrepresented groups, affirmative action policies can enhance human capital accumulation, lead to a more skilled workforce and foster economic growth)
- ▶ However, the theoretical effects of affirmative action policies tend to be ambiguous, particularly in imperfect information settings: could potentially reduce effort among individuals in the minority group, reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate assumptions about abilities based on group membership, displace majority and other minority group individuals
- ▶ In this context, empirical contributions that seek to identify the sign and magnitude of the policy effects, as well highlight unintended consequences, are particularly valuable