

BRIDGING THE GAP



The aims of the University of Edinburgh project, supported by the Athena 2000 Development Programme, were to examine the trends already flagged by the university - that women were over-represented in research grades and under-represented in lecturer grades. This examination would provide the basis for:

- assessing and gaining a fuller understanding of the underlying causes of the trends
- informing a review of practical options for improving equality of opportunity for women
- recommending changes to the institutional practices which impede and/or constrain women's career potential

In particular the project aimed to provide:

- a more practical and positive link between the university's commitments, as described in key policy statements, and the actual experience of male and female researchers trying to establish careers in science, engineering and technology (SET)
- a focus for improving aspects of institutional practice that currently disadvantage women

The project's objectives were to conduct research, with male and female research staff, to explore their approach to their careers, their attitudes to applying for lecturer posts and their experience of that process and to:

- consult principal investigators (PIs) and heads of department (HODs) on their approaches to recruitment and the selection criteria for academic posts
- develop a range of materials, for example, standard objective selection criteria for use by HODs making appointments
- recommend further action to ensure that women were not disadvantaged in the selection process
- consult other universities on their experiences

The rationale for the project came from the university's recent monitoring. This highlighted the disparity in the numbers of women on research and academic lecturing grades in SET compared with the national picture. There were slightly more women in research grades (29% UK, 30% Edinburgh) but markedly fewer on lecturer grades (20% UK, 12% Edinburgh). Monitoring of appointments showed that, where women applied for lecturer posts, they were slightly more likely to be short-listed and eventually appointed. Thus the pattern was not caused by overt discrimination but related in more subtle ways to the university's processes and practices.

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

The University of Edinburgh is Scotland's largest university, with an international as well as a national mission. Edinburgh has wide-ranging teaching and research activities. Its standing as a world centre for research is further enhanced by the presence on or around university precincts of many independently funded, but closely linked, national research institutes. The university's strength across a broad range of disciplines comes from its foundations within the Scottish educational tradition, which places emphasis on breadth as well as depth. The university has some 20,000 students and 2,500 academic and research staff of whom 66% are employed in SET.

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BACKGROUND

In recent years Edinburgh has promoted and established several related initiatives:

- a SET mentoring programme initially funded by SHEFC, now in its 4th year, with some 45 women near the beginning of their careers paired with more senior women
- a researcher development programme originally funded by SHEFC. It provides a range of professional and career development support for some 1,100 research staff - briefing sessions, short courses, workshops and access to mentoring and career contact and job seekers' registers
- a long-term collaborative project linked to work with HEFCE and other agencies to support the development of researchers over the career life cycle

Despite Edinburgh's substantial and diverse approach to developing and supporting research staff, it was clear to the project team that wider institutional policies and practices needed to be addressed to sustain the momentum and quality of their existing work. The project gained from its synergy with these initiatives. Their parallel work provided valuable information and improved the potential for linking the findings from their research with sustainable policies.

THE PROJECT

The first phase was to develop a publicity strategy to capture the interest of the research population. This was followed by:

- focus groups with research staff to identify gender disparities in approaches, attitudes and perceived barriers to career progression
- interviews with individual male and female research staff, PIs and HODs to identify attitudes towards researchers and policies/practices to support their progression

The information thus collected flagged a number of issues common to a wider range of HEIs. It was used as the basis of a questionnaire to all male and female SET researchers to enable a more quantifiable analysis of the issues.

The final phase was a report with recommendations for dissemination to the wider university and beyond.

LEARNING/TRANSFERABLE MESSAGES

Approach to career

There was a 'mismatch' between the career expectations of researchers and the expectations of senior academics for them. Many researchers foresaw a long-term career in academia and agreed that a career strategy was an essential 'first step' in a successful career.

'I think a career plan for people in science needs to be addressed. What are your options once you start doing post-docs and how do you get from there to being a lecturer?'

However few had formalised, written career plans. Most had received little or no support in planning their future from senior colleagues or from the institution. While HODs valued researchers' work, they accepted that only the most gifted and talented would progress to academic teaching. While senior academics asserted the need for researchers to undertake timely explorations of career options and adopt definitive strategies to ensure success in or outside academia, this advice did not appear to filter down to the people it was intended to benefit.

Barriers to career progression

Research staff perceived a number of barriers that needed to be addressed at institutional level:

- inability to progress within salary grades without a PhD
- the constraints of fixed term contracts 'the need to move towards job security is paramount when mapping a career in science'
- few positive female role models
- poor support from managers to attend staff development events

- academia less proactive than industry in 'investing' in the development of staff
- need for structured input from trained careers advisors
- exclusion from informal networks

Involvement in departmental activities

Research staff believed that the extent to which they were supported/ encouraged to become involved in departmental activity had an impact on their potential for progression.

Specifically they highlighted:

- relationships with colleagues
- involvement in committees – departmental, faculty and university
- contributions to the department – publications/writing research proposals /applying for funding/ attending conferences
- refereeing grant proposals/books
- reviewing

Women felt that exclusion and discrimination was subtle e.g. the timing of seminars and inaugural lectures is exclusive and

'start at a time when you cannot go if you have children. So what I wanted was to have the seminar at 4.00 o'clock. It changed for three months and then it changed back. I am almost the only parent with children – I mean mother – the men don't have this responsibility because they all have wives. And if you don't go to the seminars you are frowned upon and you miss out. There are very interesting and eminent speakers. And afterwards they go out and have a drink and talk. And you can make some good connections.'

Recruitment

Research staff were concerned about the need for equity and transparency and a more overt personnel input particularly for permanent lecturing posts and to ensure that all shortlisted applicants were given fair and equitable treatment. Concerns included:

- appointments being 'secured' before interviews had taken place:

'I've been interviewed four times for permanent positions and the latest one was last year....But that was completely stitched up.'

- the aggressive nature of interviews – a perception that it wasn't a case of appointing the most able academic, rather the person most able to withstand the *'taunts and jibes of the panel'*
- men being given unfair advantage through their involvement in informal networks

Senior academics were concerned at the low numbers of women applying for permanent positions in some disciplines and wanted to look at this and at:

- positive images being promoted by departments
- the recruitment strategies adopted by departments to overcome inequalities
- raising awareness of application activity and outcomes
- continuing and developing initiatives to support women in SET through institutional and national projects
- the self-esteem of potential applicants

Promotion

Discussions suggested that the decision to apply could be affected by:

- uncertainty surrounding eligibility
- lack of positive support from PI or line manager
- availability of money within grants to support promotion

Differences in promotion procedures within faculties made it difficult to assess application rates. PIs suggested that while there was no obvious sign of discrimination in the process, experience suggested that women often needed more active support and encouragement from colleagues before they felt confident about putting themselves forward. HODs did not perceive any gender differences in promotion applications, but wanted to explore the impact of current departmental practices on the number of applications forwarded to the Promotions Board.

Employment practices

Research staff raised issues of poor practice related to the uncertainties of fixed term contracts. The constant need to pursue funding and renegotiate contracts could increase individuals' vulnerability to abuse from within the employment system:

- forfeiting basic employment rights e.g. pension contributions
- dealing with gaps in contracts
- harassment or bullying at work

OUTCOMES

The project has provided the university with a clearer understanding of the:

- career plans and aspirations of men and women researchers and the institutional barriers to achieving their aims
- experiences of men and women applying for teaching posts
- departmental appointment processes which directly bear on women's career opportunities in research environments
- constraints and barriers faced by women in applying for lecturing posts and in the appointment process

A report on the findings will be disseminated in the university and more widely. It will include clear recommendations to the SET faculty and the university on the actions needed to tackle these issues in the longer term.

THE FUTURE

It was recognised that not all the outcomes would be realised within the project time scale. However, through the regular monitoring of the university's recruitment and workforce, the benefits of the project will continue to be reaped. The longer term objectives remain:

- an increase in women applying for lecturing posts
- an increase in women being appointed to lecturing posts
- a greater awareness of issues facing women in SET among HODs and in the faculty generally

- changes in institutional practice resulting from the project's findings

A dissemination conference will be held for other HEIs interested in exploring options for applying both the project methodology and key recommendations in their own institutions. The project steering group will continue to monitor the outcomes and ensure that the appropriate bodies in the university take up the recommendations made. They will work with the Athena Project at a UK level on an action implementation strategy.