# Encouraging Applications From Women Scientists

The Athena 2000 Development Programme commissioned a study from the University of Oxford to identify and research the barriers, real and perceived, which prevent women from applying for academic appointments for which they are eligible. The study was part of a programme of positive action aimed at encouraging applications from women scientists for academic appointments at Oxford. The aims of the study were to:

- ensure that all who were eligible were fully and accurately informed of the opportunities available
- identify and remove barriers that may prevent women applying for academic appointments thus increasing applications

The rationale for the study came from Oxford's recent recruitment monitoring. This showed that women were appointed to SET academic posts at least in proportion to their applications. However the numbers applying to Oxford suggested that the potential recruitment pool might be much larger. They concluded that there were suitably qualified women who did not apply for academic posts at Oxford. It was expected that the project would increase the number of applications for academic posts at Oxford from women in science, engineering and technology (SET) and:

- provide information to use in target-setting for subsequent years
- produce realistic and achievable recommendations for the further steps to be taken by the university to continue to improve the number of applications

The results of the project will support the development of initiatives to assist research staff and others who wish to move into academic posts. The university will act on those within its influence while others require action on a UK basis.

## The University Of Oxford

The university has some 7,000 staff of whom 46% are women, only 20% of academics are women, in SET 13% are women, but of the over 2,000 research staff 40% are women. The university recently re-structured into five divisions. Departments remain autonomous but operate within general university and divisional policy. Oxford colleges are autonomous institutions and many academics have separate contracts with the university and their college.

Oxford's collegiate structure and some key differences in staffing (eg no distinction between lecturers and senior lecturers) means it may be less easily understood externally than many other institutions. Although it is many years since Oxford was an exclusively male environment, and despite the success of women who apply for academic posts, the university is aware that it needs to counteract a continuing perception that it is a white, male institution.

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ATHENA PROJECT

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## Background

Women represent 20% of Oxford's academics and 13% of SET academics. Oxford's recruitment monitoring showed women's low representation was not due to discrimination in selection. In 1998/99 women were 26% of applicants, 30% of shortlists and 25% of appointees. In 1997/98 women were 26% of applicants, 28% of shortlists and 30% of appointees. This held true regardless of subject and level of appointment, although the number/proportion of women applying were lower in both SET and higher grade posts.

Oxford was concerned that, although the proportion of women applying was higher than in the existing workforce, the effect would be only a slow improvement in the gender profile. What was needed was a shift to ensure that the full range of suitably qualified women applied. They had:

- analysed national data on numbers/proportions of women in SET posts in other research universities
- undertaken a gender analysis of contract research scientists and junior research fellows
- reviewed the prior experience of applicants, shortlisted candidates and appointees

The university had recently expanded a self-organised network of women tutors to form the Oxford Women's Network (OWN) with over 700 members including contract researchers, short-term teaching and support staff. OWN with its email network and occasional meetings provided the means to disseminate information on and from the project.

## The Project

There were three main components to the project:

- a report (March 2001) identifying barriers to women's applications; based on independently carried out interviews and focus groups with women in their recruitment pool, including those already at Oxford, other research active HEIs and in industry
- a residential careers event in July 2001 for 60 women who might in future be interested in working in Oxford (not funded by Athena)
- an action plan for submission to the university in autumn 2001 - the project will continue to work with the Athena Project to develop an action implementation strategy

The interviews and focus groups provided interesting insights into women's careers:

- never having a career plan - just progressing to a PhD then into post-doc positions
- the move from post-doc was the hardest to achieve, serious career choices had to be made
- those thinking of a move to industry looked for *'an environment with career progression, development and security. Universities are quite badly managed. There is no management structure. It is difficult to progress up a random structure'*
- *'people are funnelling out because there is nothing to funnel into, there is no career structure, if you do win through you are winning totally against the odds'*
- the motivation for those interested in Oxford was the work of the departments not the university's repute
- men and women talked of women's low levels of self-confidence, thought women would be less likely to apply and that failing to be appointed had a negative impact on subsequent applications
- the importance for internal candidates of a signal that their application would be welcomed.
- confidence at interview- when men are asked questions they don't know *'they ad-lib, women in general say: Oh, I don't really know, I would have to look it up. Which is probably the honest answer. But I don't think committees recognise that general sex difference'*

- the difficulty of some selection criteria- women on short-term contracts could be disadvantaged in demonstrating *'the ability to obtain and supervise research grants'*, if judged on experience rather than potential
- appointments, particularly for more senior posts, were assumed to be based on *'who you know'* an *'old boys network'*, rather than strictly on merit
- none felt uncomfortable about working in a predominately male environment
- the dual elements of high visibility and invisibility
  - high visibility, the *'gossipy academic environment, where women's personal lives and relationships were talked about, was detrimental to women'*
  - invisibility of women's work, which was not profiled to the same extent as men's work
- possibilities for flexible/part-time working would be welcomed, but it would be useful to be able to talk to someone independent of the selection process about its feasibility for specific appointments and a concern that, if this was raised with the department at an early stage it might go against the enquirer

The project was fully supported at senior level. The Vice-Chancellor and two heads of SET divisions were interviewed as key informants. The third head of a SET division was on the project committee. This commitment will be important in acting on the project's findings and recommendations.

## Learning/Transferable Messages

Many of the issues identified by the project apply to a wide range of HEIs:

- the image of SET, the danger of women's work being invisible and making the effort to profile women's work in individual HEIs and SET generally
- the need for selection panels to contain both men and women briefed on gender stereotyping
- networking which includes support and encouragement by established academics
- a comprehensive and consistent approach to part-time working which includes consideration of career development
- women's equal access to development opportunities
- the need for research group heads to be aware of the danger of overlooking women in their teams
- age-related pay scales as a potential source for discrimination (where women take time out for childcare). Oxford's pay audit did not identify discrimination but links between age and pay will continue to be monitored
- expectations of quantity of research output to take account of different career patterns, which may include career breaks for childcare.
- providing subsidised childcare shows a commitment to attracting/retaining women
- women researchers to be seen as a potential source of recruitment for academic posts
- a more structured approach on the career development of researchers to be adopted in individual HEIs and across the sector

## Outcomes

The university is now considering the steering committee's recommendations, included in which are suggestions from delegates to the women in science conference held in July. Much of what follows is already included in the university's human resources strategy.

### Projecting a positive image

- give greater publicity to women's work in SET both current and past – to counteract the university's continuing image of a white, male institution
- make available publicity material (describing the work of the university/ its many successes) for exhibitions and websites – taking care to use inclusive language and images

- departments to think about incorporating positive images throughout their work programmes eg inviting women from other HEIs to discuss their work at lectures and other events

## Selection criteria and the recruitment process

- **advertising** use relevant women's networks, such as Athena's Local Academic Women's Networks and other existing women's scientific networks, add a welcoming positive action statement to advertisements, review the materials used in consultation with colleges, involve women and men in drawing up selection criteria and check for inadvertent adverse impact
- **interviewing** review selection processes and provide candidates with reassuring and up- to-date information on the process
- **training** extend the requirement for at least one member of each panel to attend training to panel chairs

## Employment practices

- review salary structures against equal pay considerations as well as monitoring and pay audits
- provide guidance/staff development for those involved in academic recruitment to emphasise the importance of not allowing cost considerations to disadvantage women who combine careers and child-rearing.
- introduce mentoring to support researchers and encourage them to consider academic careers
- provide coherent careers support/staff development opportunities for researchers and guidance for their managers
- design a university career development fellowship scheme with an emphasis on positive action for women
- develop policies to enable academics to achieve a desirable work-life balance and a more comprehensive/ consistent approach to part-time working
- expand the number of nursery places for under-fives and include information on university childcare facilities in further particulars
- canvass senior women to ascertain the level of support for a senior women's network additional to the groups currently within the Oxford Women's Network.

## Future positive action initiatives

- hold a positive action event similar in aims to the women in science conference every two years, possibly extended to social sciences and humanities
- evaluate the success of the actions
- monitor applications from women and the numbers appointed to see if they increase as anticipated

# The Future

The university divisional boards responsible for academic administration including academic appointments will be briefed by the Vice-Chancellor on the project's outcomes and recommendations. The boards will be assisted in incorporating appropriate targets in their development plans. Continuing evaluation will be built into the University's planning process, whereby academic divisions set out three year rolling plans on the basis of which resources are allocated.