

RESNET 2000

The University of East Anglia project, supported by the 1999 Athena Development Programme, was to develop a low cost, self-sustaining support network for women contract research staff (CRS) in the Science Schools at UEA. The network extended to the Norwich Research Park (NRP) - the Institute of Food Research and the John Innes Centre. The Network (defined as a voluntary meeting which brings together people with common interests for mutual help, support and contact) was not seen as lasting forever, but as embedding itself sufficiently to be maintained for several years. The project aimed to design and deliver:

- a network for women CRS in the sciences at UEA and NRP
- a programme of activity to support the development of knowledge, confidence, attitudes and skills including workshops, visiting speakers, access to successful women role models and peer support to develop confidence
- an email link enhancing and encouraging communication, exchanging ideas and contact

The rationale for the project was that women do not lack the ability to do a job, but often lack the confidence to take themselves seriously as applicants. The more women understand about the processes that are at work, the better they are able to manage their career development, to make conscious choices, and improve their chances in the higher education job market. The benefits from the project would be to:

- raise individual awareness of the current situation of women scientists
- provide a forum where common concerns and issues could be explored / discussed
- empower women to improve their outlook on their career in science
- provide data on women contract research staff
- feed into policy-making to improve the gender balance
- increase the visibility of women in science at UEA and the NRP

'as a place where people are interested, interact and communicate, ResNet 2000 is definitely my waterhole in the desert' - member of co-ordinating group

UEA

UEA has grown rapidly in the last few years to 11,300 students and some 2,100 staff. It is a research-intensive university with a strong research base in the sciences and a tradition of fostering inter-disciplinarity.

The numbers of women undergraduates in the sciences is about 50:50. At postgraduate level the gender mix is similar but the balance shifts significantly in favour of men when it comes to research and academic appointments. In the science schools academics total 161 and research staff total 216, 10% of the academic staff and 41% of the research staff are female.

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ResNet 2000's website www.uea.ac.uk/csed/resnet/ gives more information including the programme and the survey findings on career perceptions of CRS, and a link to the Athena website www.athena.ic.ac.uk

BACKGROUND

UEA has a longstanding commitment to staff development and senior managers who have consistently supported the work of the Centre for Staff and Educational Development (CSED). In the light of the Bett Report, the University's Human Resources Policy Committee had looked at the employment statistics on research staff and welcomed and actively supported the project.

ResNet 2000 was a new initiative, but built on personal and career development initiatives already successful at UEA. Since 1993, CSED has offered *Springboard* to over 200 women. *Springboard* is a personal development programme for women, built around workshops, a workbook and the use of role models. It actively promotes the use of networks and has been highly influential at UEA. Many women have gained promotion and made significant career choices as a result of *Springboard*. It has also generated a network for secretarial / clerical staff with over 260 members, with its own steering group, newsletter, meetings programme and active email link. A significant number of members of the ResNet 2000 Co-ordinating Group had taken part in *Springboard*.

THE PROJECT

The network was linked to CSED and, in its project phase, had a project officer providing guidance, administration and support. A Co-ordinating Group of women CRS were responsible for shaping the network. The membership of the group was to be time limited and members would actively 'grow' the next cohort. Membership of the group was itself a developmental activity, to be shared over time by other members of the network. An exploratory meeting open to all women CRS was held, fifteen women offered to become members and six were chosen to introduce the network to the University, including representatives of NRP.

The Steering and Co-ordinating Groups merged their meetings; the Steering Group (senior women from the participating organisations) did not meet

on its own after an initial meeting. It simply seemed to work better that way. Both groups gained, the input from the Steering Group was invaluable and did not prevent membership of the Co-ordinating Group being a developmental opportunity.

In February 2000 a half-day conference was held to launch the network. It set the style for the programme with presentations from Phyllis Starkey, MP on '*The Culture of Science: does science suffer from its gender imbalance?*' and on '*Transferable Skills in Science and Technology*' from Daphne Thompson, Department of Trade and Industry. There was also the opportunity for input to decide the shape of future sessions.

The programme of nine events with 225 attendances recognised the importance of successful role models. Women speakers, principally with a science background, were invited to share their experiences. The sessions, the majority of which were held at lunch times, included:

- focus on positive communication
- life of a female education correspondent
- joint career development - is it possible?
- life maintenance: employment and pensions
- career development of women scientists from the perspective of the research councils
- presentation of career development survey results to senior managers and members of the network

Also two of the Steering Group met the Vice-Chancellor and Chancellor to discuss issues on career development for women CRS. A member of the Co-ordinating Group attended the *Women in Science: Making Change Happen Conference* in Brussels. Two network members attended a career planning workshop held by the University of London Career Service.

The email link

The Network's email link now numbers 85 women (54% of women CRS staff). Email has been a valuable means of communication, but it is probably too early in the life of the network for it to be used as forum for debate.

Survey of CRS

From the early network meetings it became clear that if ResNet wanted to influence mainstream thinking this could only be achieved if anecdote and intuition were backed with data and evidence.

The Universities and Colleges Staff Development Agency (UCoSDA) kindly agreed to fund a survey on perceptions of career development of CRS (women and men). UEA's Survey Office undertook the survey. In July 2000 the results were presented to the University's senior management. Copies of the results were made available to Network members and to male respondents who asked for them. A prize draw encouraged 176 CRS to return their forms (a 36% response rate). 43% of women responded and 30% of men.

LEARNING/T TRANSFERABLE MESSAGES

Networks

- it is easy to underestimate the organisational experience demanded of the co-ordinating group. They had to learn how to run a network, organise events, and set realistic time scales. These are all transferable skills which build confidence, but they take time to develop
- it is important networks have an 'umbrella', in this case CSED, to give administrative support and guidance
- CRS staff only have a limited amount of time to devote to the network
- the contribution of lay members of Council especially women, is immensely valuable
- involving senior managers is important, but the when and how needs careful consideration
- to influence senior management data collection and analysis is required
- a network is not a union - there a tightrope to tread between campaigning, development and influence
- the focused nature of the work and conditions of employment of CRS staff make them a difficult group to reach,

who do not find it easy to take time out for their own development

- women CRS do not want a feminist network but do value the opportunity to ask questions in a single-sex environment
- CRS want to focus on mainstream research issues not just issues affecting women. It is important to balance consciousness raising and information sessions
- the value of a concrete task to focus on (the survey). It gives the network a clear purpose
- the needs of women in the first three years of appointment as permanent staff are similar to women CRS
- issues of self-esteem and self-confidence are not peculiar to CRS, but to all women
- email links take time to establish but it's important to keep circulating regular information. It takes time to build momentum and establish the network as an ongoing presence

From the perceptions of career development survey

A clear message from the survey is that for CRS to make genuine and realistic career choices they need information and the active support of their managers, their institutions and the Research Councils. It is too easy for all parties to collude in the fiction that for the majority of CRS a long-term career in research is a viable option. Factors identified as promoting career development were more jobs, increased motivation, secure funding, support interest and encouragement from principal investigators and an identifiable career structure. Obstacles to career progressions cited were short term contracts, lack of funding, few permanent jobs, lack of opportunity, poor management structure.

Other findings were:

- research is a positive career choice, CRS do not look to move into academic careers, 75% were not interested in a lectureship as their next post
- 53% wish to stay at UEA or the Norwich Research Park

- 63% of CRS felt they were strongly career motivated
- only 24% of CRS were satisfied with career progress
- the differences in *perceptions* of career development between men and women are marginal
- job descriptions matter - 20% did not know if they had them, 27% thought they did not
- women CRS start to lose out in salary terms after their mid twenties
- becoming a parent makes a difference to career decisions, for women flexible hours become more important, for men safer options / no relocation / financial stability
- 46% of men had worked elsewhere as compared with 26% of women
- 45% of CRS had contracts of 2 years or less-which they felt made it more difficult to publish
- women recognise that they have to work harder at career progression than men to succeed

PROJECT OUTCOMES

A successful network with the growing support of women CRS at UEA and the Norwich Research Park. The impact of the network was evaluated and there was overwhelming support for its continuing. Below are a selection of comments:

- *'I've used the information to kick-start an evaluation of the post-doctoral / contract workers in my Institute. There will now be a representative on the management board'*
- *'it is good to know that CRS issues are being taken seriously, and that a network exists to monitor and support us. I liked .. the survey results - nice psychological boost to feel part of the gang! And again I am hopeful that the visibility that ResNet has will be a positive thing'*
- *'it's opened my eyes to the circumstances and situations that affect women working in science and academic institutions, not only UEA and the NRP but more widely in the UK and abroad'*
- *'made me feel more part of the*

University. Great to meet other research staff. Good to know that issues related to contract research staff are being kept on the agenda

- *'it has heightened my awareness of the problems facing all CRS and put me in touch with sources from which I can check my rights. It has also been very interesting'*
- *'when I first signed up to ResNet I was sceptical that it wouldn't be for me. I can honestly say however that I have enjoyed every event I have attended'*

The project has generated a significant survey, which contains a wealth of information on the profile of the UEA / NRP CRS community: their views, careers, aspirations, expectations and perceived obstacles.

It has substantially increased the level of awareness among UEA senior management of CRS career issues.

THE FUTURE

A full report on the survey will be produced as a UCoSDA briefing paper in autumn 2000 and a report on the project and the survey findings will be presented to the University's Human Resources Policy Committee

The Network plans to continue after September 2000, and to expand to include women in other subject areas.

UEA is the lead institution for the East Anglia Athena Local Academic Women's Network (LAWN) launched in September 2000.