

MIGHT MENTORING HELP?

The Imperial College project, supported by the 1999 Athena Development Programme, was to develop and pilot a number of mentoring strategies for women in science, engineering and technology (SET) and to:

- compare and contrast the different strategies
- evaluate the perceived utility (for participants) of each activity
- evaluate the feasibility of each activity in order to identify best practice
- raise the profile of concerns about the careers of women in SET at Imperial College
- decide which offered the greatest benefit to the College

The College gave a commitment to continue the activities which the project team judged to be successful. It was clear from the beginning that if any of the strategies piloted were to become a part of College life, they would need to make fairly low demands in terms of set-up and management time.

The College felt that more highly qualified women might be willing to continue careers in SET if:

- they are provided with more opportunities to discuss the problems which they feel they face
- they feel less isolated and unsupported
- they receive more informed advice about their personal career development

To this end the project piloted and evaluated three different types of mentoring:

- personal mentors for young academics and post-docs
- career issue workshops
- a college email discussion site for issues relating to women in SET

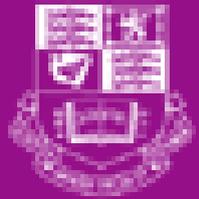
IMPERIAL COLLEGE

Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine is a major research based university. In 1999-2000 it had 10,387 students of whom 6747 were undergraduates and 3640 postgraduates. 25% of undergraduates and 30% of postgraduates were female. These data mask differences between departments. 53% of the medical school intake were female compared to 35% in the science and engineering departments. Just 6% of the professors in the science and engineering departments are female. Compared to the HE sector as a whole, women are under-represented at Imperial College. This is, no doubt, a reflection of the College's focus on science, engineering and medicine.

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Further information on the project is accessible on the project website
www.ic.ac.uk/Athena via the Athena website www.athena.ic.ac.uk



BACKGROUND

In 1998 Imperial College established a Rector's Committee on 'Academic Opportunities 2000'. The committee's objective was to 'create/ensure a level playing field for women academics, by removing any barriers that may exist in appointment or career advancement for highly qualified women, and to ensure that the numbers of such women in the College were as high as possible.' The committee commissioned a report on 'the nature and extent of the problems experienced by women academics'. A number of barriers to women's career development were identified, among them were 'insufficient career guidance / gender discrimination in career development' and 'isolation/lack of support at work'.

Existing College provisions include individual academic advisors for probationary lecturers, who meet once a term for discussions, which typically focus on research activities (particularly publication) and teaching (particularly attendance at college teaching courses), but do not necessarily focus on broader personal career development issues. The staff development unit offers workshops on careers, career management and career planning for post-doctoral researchers.

THE PROJECT

The mentoring programme

The programme ran from December 1999 to June 2000. All women post-doctoral Research Assistants and young academic staff (under 35) were offered mentors. Imperial did not have sufficient senior academic women to consider only women mentors. Also the project team wished to compare the impact and utility of female and male mentors.

The programme had support at the highest level. The Rector signed letters to all potential mentees and mentors. 41% of the eligible group accepted the offer of a mentor and we had 32 pairs. The level and enthusiasm of the response to the invitation to mentor was

high. Almost no one refused. Reasons for participation varied:

Mentees accepted out of curiosity / welcoming the opportunity to talk about their career and /or balancing a career with a family. *'I thought it was a good idea and worth supporting and I wanted to chat to someone about combining children and a career' 'I just thought I would give it a go' '..to discuss things that I didn't feel able to talk about in my own department' 'I hoped that I would be offered help, given good suggestions for my career, how do I plan for a family, advice on life balance and on how to be successful'*

Mentors volunteered because of sympathy or concern about the issue / the Rector asked them!- *'a letter signed by the Rector meant that I couldn't refuse' (male) 'I feel strongly about the issue. I see that women face greater problems' (male) 'I was asked to and I would have liked to have had something like this when I started out' (female)*

Pairing mentees and mentors

This was the most difficult part. Mentees were asked their preferences on the gender and department of their mentor. Where possible these were met. One mentor described the process as like Blind Date. Where mentees had reservations about the impact of the scheme these often related to having been poorly matched to a mentor .

'it's a bit of a blind date, you might get a mentee who doesn't want you- not your sort of person, you just can't relate to them on a personal level- although it's good at times to deal with different people'

'it's chemistry, in the end good matching comes down to whether pairs get on and feel that they can talk to each other'

Evaluation of the mentoring programme

Evaluation was undertaken through interviews and questionnaires to mentees and mentors.

Mentees - the scheme was well received, half said it had increased their confidence. Almost all would continue in the scheme and wanted the College to continue it. The most highly rated benefits were:

- having someone impartial to talk to
- advice on career progression
- advice on balancing career and family
- learning about a different department/field

'I got advice and encouragement based on my mentor's experience' 'it was very positive. It was nice to be able to talk and interact with someone who is friendly and can give advice and support' - 'it definitely helped my confidence, it was great to talk to someone' 'I was able to talk about me'

Mentors found it hard to evaluate their impact. Many were unsure about the extent to which they had been helpful. Most were willing to continue and believed the scheme should be continued. The experience also encouraged self-reflection *'it made me think about the department and made me realise how serious the problems really are' (male) 'it caused me to think about my career and how I could have done things differently' (female)*

Those who declined/did not reply to the mentee invitation were followed up. Their main reasons for deciding not to participate were:

- feeling that they already had an adequate support mechanism
- clarity about their career direction
- being too busy to take on another commitment
- dislike of a scheme aimed only at women

Career issue workshops

Three workshops were run. They were given by women with experience of:

- networking and the female academic career
- integrating your career with your partner's and balancing home and work

- physics, families and partners. Invitations were sent to all young academics, post-docs and final year PhD students, about 400 women. The uptake for the first two was disappointing, so the third was run on a departmental basis but did not generate a higher uptake

However those who did attend rated them highly. *'I found it to be greatly enlightening to listen to the career stories of the three women speakers. I felt inspired by their determination and resourcefulness' 'fascinating insights and comfortingly familiar' 'the words that I heard today will stay in my mind for a long time to come'*

The main reasons for non-attendance were lack of time, a feeling that the family/partner theme was not relevant to them and having attended similar sessions offered by the staff development unit.

Email discussion

Athnet, an email 'chat' location was set up, open to all academic staff to discuss issues relating to women in SET. It was offered on the basis that some women might:

- not want a personal mentor
- not be interested in workshops
- not like to / not wish to be seen to participate in gender specific activities.
- nevertheless welcome the opportunity to 'chat' to other women via email

It was hoped this might also 'net' the most isolated women. Athnet was publicised with individual letters, a feature in the College newspaper and posters. Very few people subscribed. The main reasons given were lack of awareness (despite publicity) time and that yet more email was not welcome

LEARNING/TRANSFERABLE MESSAGES

Mentoring can provide a powerful support mechanism for some women. However women post-docs and young lecturers are under enormous time

pressures in institutions like Imperial and will only give up precious time for activities which they see as clearly offering them some 'value-added'.

A successful scheme can run without major investment in briefing and training (briefings for mentees and mentors took about an hour), but high level institutional support is essential to establish the credibility of the scheme and give visibility. Also :

- men can successfully mentor women— *'I was pleasantly surprised .I was very lucky with my mentor. It shows how crucial the matching is. He offered a world of experience'*
- mentees and mentors should be allowed to express preferences about their preferred 'partner'- different people- different needs/ preferences. - *'I wanted to get advice on how to carry on what I am doing now, from someone already established in the institution. The main problem is that we are doing very different research, so it's difficult for him to offer me very practical advice, there are different rules in different fields'*
- there should be a mechanism for ill-matched pairs to exit and arrange alternatives pairings - *'I wanted to chat to someone about the issues involving combining children and a career, but my mentor didn't have any experience of the child/career side of it so I got less than I expected'*
- there is no ideal time to offer mentoring- mentees' views differ on when a mentor is of greatest value
- the reasons why mentoring is offered only to women should be clearly articulated and publicised

Mentors would have benefited and in hindsight would have welcomed some more initial input on the mentoring process, they need:

- to be briefed on how to manage the initial meeting (which they should set up)
- some guidance on subsequent expectations- *'I have no idea what*

others were doing, what was expected. I certainly could do with feedback on the expected level of activities'

- to be given feedback on their impact *'the hardest part was my doubts about my effectiveness, I was very willing to give it a go if people found it useful' 'I kept asking myself, what can I do?'*

OUTCOMES

The project heightened awareness of the issue of women in SET within Imperial. Support from the Athena Project provided a most valuable platform.

In a project of such a short duration it was impossible to begin to assess whether mentoring might impact on retention. However the College now has a better understanding of the:

- feasibility and perceived utility of personal mentoring as a tool to provide personal and career development and to address the isolation which some women experience
- utility of each of the activities - levels of uptake, reasons for uptake/refusal
- issues which women PhD/RA/young academic staff feel they face in relation to careers in SET - the type of information and support which these women find helpful

THE FUTURE

Personal mentors were the most successful strategy. A set of recommendations have been made on the shape and form of a College mentoring programme. The project team's report has gone to the Chair of Academic Opportunities 2000 and it is anticipated that the Committee will take it to the College Council.

There is a demand for career workshops from some women. These will continue in collaboration with the staff development unit. The project confirmed that a number of women do feel isolated. The project team are recommending an annual event for all women post-docs and teaching staff to enable those who do feel isolated to meet others outside their department or section.