

# BEATING BARRIERS AND CONSTRAINTS IN HE CAREERS



This report was commissioned as part of the 1999 Athena Development Programme. The report uses the OU as a case study and:

- seeks to find out why the OU is more successful than wider HE in recruiting women as full-time SET academics and as part-time SET Associate Lecturers (ALs) in particular
- identifies the barriers and constraints in women's careers in SET in HE and how OU good practice helps ALs to overcome those barriers
- recommends transferable messages for other HE employers

With its ALs (part-time teaching staff who tutor groups of students), the OU taps into a pool of qualified and experienced women who, mainly as a direct or indirect consequence of family and child-care responsibilities, have been excluded from other HE work. AL appointments offer women a way to keep working part-time in HE and maintain contact with HE during career breaks. They give women researchers the opportunity to gain experience in HE teaching. AL working hours are flexible, most work is home based and dates and times of tutorials etc. are known from the start of the year (so ALs may plan ahead for child-care etc.) As the report shows, the flexibility combined with the training and development opportunities provided by the OU makes it the employer of choice for women with family commitments.

The rationale for the study is that women seeking to establish academic careers in SET in HE face a number of barriers and constraints to their progress - the detrimental impact of career breaks, relatively low publication rates and concentration in low status positions and lower paid short-term contract work. The objectives of the study are to:

- explore the staff development opportunities for women in SET who teach part-time as ALs
- collect experiences from AL women scientists and technologists about the impact of the OU on their career
- identify appropriate professional development and support for women scientists and technologists (re)entering careers in HE

OU ALs make up a high proportion of all women academics in SET – for every three women lecturers in SET in other UK HE, there is one equivalent woman OU AL. The report includes the results of a survey of women ALs in the OU's Science and Technology faculties. The results represent the views and perceptions of a significant sample. 269 ALs returned the questionnaire (167 scientists and 102 technologists – a 50% return rate).

The survey covers ALs' career aspirations and experiences, the barriers and constraints they face and the compromises and choices they make in progressing, marking time in, or exiting their careers in SET in HE. It provides some important transferable messages and learning for HE employers generally on good practice in the recruitment, retention and progression of women academics.

## THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The OU has some 800 central academic and research staff on its main campus, 300 academic staff in 13 regional centres and 292 regional study centres. The OU compares well with other HE in terms of women's progression in science in full-time academic posts – 9% of its professors are women (4% elsewhere) along with 23% of its senior lecturers/researchers (11% elsewhere), and 55% of its lecturers (21% elsewhere). 42% of its part-time Science ALs are female.

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## THE REPORT

Many ALs were previously employed full-time in SET in HE. The barriers, compromises and choices involved in why they are not currently so employed have implications for the recruitment and retention of women in HE generally. ALs, however, tend not to view such issues in direct gender terms but indirectly as their individual choices. The report includes illuminating comments from ALs on their experiences:

**Location** – *‘full-time research is not compatible with a young family especially when I live 45 minutes from the nearest possible workplace’ ‘research requires post-docs to move about in the early years, preferably including to America. This is not easy to tie in with a husband’s career. When children are added to the equation, it is even harder’*

**Family-related compromises** – children, relocating with the partner’s work, fitting in with their partner’s career, taking part-time work or positions where they are overqualified, caring for sick or elderly parents. 1 in 5 commented that the compromises were *their* choice. Women find they have to choose between family and career because HE offers no middle ground. *‘there were no job-sharing or career break schemes’ ‘it is rare for a male to take many years out of his career for his family. The years a woman takes “out” are at a time when reputations for their male colleagues are being forged and promotion is rapid. This is an irreversible compromise’*

**Career breaks** – women’s SET expertise soon becomes outdated when they lose contact with HE careers, affecting their future employment opportunities. *‘I have not been able to update my skills and keep abreast of new techniques in my research field’*

**Scarcity of part-time work** – *‘part-time posts are heavy on time and light on income’* where opportunities exist they are relatively low-paid, routine and low-status.

**Terms and conditions of employment** – particularly in pay, trying to move away into permanent posts and in promotion, *‘paid less than equivalent male colleagues. This was not openly disclosed, nor attributable to competence related to tasks’, ‘I would like to have more autonomy, be able to use secretarial staff’*

**Male domination** – *‘I resigned my post because of the hostile environment’ ‘difficulty in getting responsible jobs within the department, which then provides a barrier to promotion’ ‘I have faced barriers as my male peers were actively promoted/involved ... sexism is rarely open so how can it be proved? It makes us sound bitter’*

**Work culture/atmosphere** – often reinforces male domination and makes women feel they are not taken seriously as academics and that they are isolated from male colleagues. *‘the barrier is being taken seriously rather than as some light entertainment at scientific conferences’* Women experience exclusion *‘in a system driven by nepotism and old boy networks’* and feel that *‘as long as one is prepared to accept that in order to compete with men, women must be better than them, there are no barriers with academic success or respect’*

**Women ‘don’t need a career’** – it is often assumed that women will become child-carers, while men will be the earners. Women are often seen as ‘taking jobs away from men’ *‘applying for a research grant I was told that I did not “need” it as much as a male colleague.’ ‘Once I became a mother, employers saw me as someone to give “jobs” to, but were not committed to my career development’* Women are often asked to take on other non-teaching or research tasks on the *‘assumption that female staff can take on more organisation because they don’t “need” a career’*

**Role compromised** – *‘I have often been expected to be the person to organise meetings, book rooms and type minutes because I am the woman in the group’ ‘occasions when my good will was used to give me a greater teaching load than my*

*male colleagues, therefore reducing my chances of successful research', 'if a male colleague is interested in the same project...I believe that more support is usually given to the male. The female is expected to compromise'*

**Research or teaching?** – ALs believe lecturing is more family-friendly than research, mainly due to the time constraints of research careers: *'long hours are required to compete with unmarried people with no commitments' 'I was not allowed to supervise other less qualified people as I was not there all the time' 'no part-time work was allowed because "if research is important enough to get funded, it must be important enough to be completed in the most timely fashion" 'I couldn't even finish my full-time position part-time after having my child'*

**Flexibility** – this is the unsolicited word used by every other AL in their responses and is the most important consideration in remaining in HE careers while caring for their children. AL work is *'ideal employment to accommodate family commitments'*

**OU professional development** – *'gave me confidence to stand up in front of people which had been shattered in my previous employment'* The OU provides and requires training and development in generic and subject based teaching skills. It offers courses and pathways for ALs to become accredited teachers. New ALs are given a (paid) mentor. ALs have free study of OU courses. The OU fund for ALs' development can include conferences or research activity.

## LEARNING/TRANSFERABLE MESSAGES

Career progression in SET in HE is very different for those who are single and childless. Virtually all ALs commented on making *'compromises in their careers that they would not have, if they were male'* Ways through the indirect barriers are not as obvious as for the direct barriers, although the reasons why AL work is

chosen and what the OU offers ALs points the way. ALs have opportunities that do not exist in wider HE:

- flexible part-time working
- professional development and training opportunities

As a result many women fall out of HE careers altogether or turn to the OU to keep their careers alive (some women in full-time HE became ALs to benefit from the professional development the OU provides).

The report concludes that if other HE institutions are serious about increasing the numbers of women they employ in SET they need to offer similar opportunities and to consider:

- how to retain those who become primary child-carers
- being more receptive to highly qualified (re)entrants who need to update their skills
- actively developing the careers of all employees (not just full-time staff)
- asking their women academics what experience or training they need
- assisting women to switch between research and lecturing (and back again) to allow for family commitments
- returner schemes covering research and teaching skills
- more part-time posts and job shares for women
- updating opportunities for women on career breaks
- possibilities for distance learning and virtual teaching for child carers
- more flexible employment terms and conditions for women in SET

## THE FUTURE

The report makes suggestions for development within the OU, including the possibility of OU collaboration with other HE institutions to transferring good practice.

During the study an electronic conference was set up to enable ALs to contribute to the report and to create an open forum for general discussion. Both will continue as an informal support network for SET ALs. Good use is being made of them by ALs.

### OU ALs – the importance of research experience for career development

Apart from funding ALs to take research degrees, there are currently few OU development opportunities in research. Two-thirds of ALs wish to re-enter HE in research careers. Recognising that *'no research, no movement to full-time HE'* the OU will be looking at the suggestions made by ALs:

- **central research** – *'small involvement in projects carried out in Milton Keynes (e.g. assist in a field project)' 'help us undertake our own (paid) projects on a part-time basis at Milton Keynes' 'opportunity to participate in research projects "from a distance'*
- **regional research** – *'grants for work that can be carried out somewhere other than Milton Keynes' 'lab facilities available at [regional] study centres' 'collaboration with local universities' 'offers of placements in local academic, industrial or government labs'*
- **more contact with OU researchers** – *'useful to know what research is being done at Walton Hall, to identify whether there are members of full-time staff with whom we might collaborate', 'visit Walton Hall once/twice a year to "follow" someone else's research projects' 'input from central staff on research at staff development sessions', 'offer open days for ALs on career breaks to visit OU research labs in their course speciality to see technical and research developments. This could prompt collaboration on projects'*
- **academic papers and research funding** – *'a chance to do research at*

*my local university something practical and write a paper or two', 'use of OU as their "home" university to apply to grant-awarding bodies for research funds'*

- **'updates'** – receive research updates and training in new research techniques, supplementing existing OU science 'away days' where ALs can *'update on recent research'*
- **more research information** – a newsletter with an *'update on current OU research programmes to allow contact if relevant experience is welcomed – offered – reciprocated'*, information on *'OU Research Committees, discussion groups and research funding'* and to *'clarify the available [research] opportunities and how to make use of them – I find it difficult to work out how to go about starting research'*
- **refreshing/introducing research skills** – *'it's years since I've been in a lab...my skills are out of date' 'I have never done any science research so some kind of introduction would be useful'* Development involving *'research training in new technologies'* and *'short updating courses on laboratory techniques'* at Walton Hall or *'run in partnership with conventional universities'*

### The OU in partnership with other HEIs

Potential areas for future development of OU good practice and transferable messages from the ALiS Report with wider HE include:

- developing returner schemes covering lecturing as well as research
- more part-time posts or job shares for women on career breaks
- initiatives for retraining women who have had career breaks and need to update their teaching and research skills
- ideas to enable women who are out of HE employment during career breaks to keep up to date with developments in their field
- exploring the future of distance learning and 'virtual' teaching for women (and men) who take career breaks to care for children