

PROGRESS - DEVELOPING A MENTORING TRAINING PROGRAMME

The project from the WiTEC (women in science, engineering and technology) unit at Sheffield Hallam, supported by the 1999 Athena Development Programme was to improve the retention and career progression of women in science, engineering and technology (SET) by the development of a mentoring training course and training package. The course once developed would become part of the University's staff development programme. Mentoring was put forward as a way to address the under-representation of women in SET by:

- fostering a more supportive and collaborative team culture
- demonstrating commitment to development and training
- improving communication throughout the institution

The project was designed as an interventionist one with a research and dissemination programme which:

- challenged the institutional cultures and attitudes detrimental to women's career progression
- targeted top management who would then encourage staff to attend the training
- identified the needs of potential mentees
- produced a course to train senior staff (men and women) in SET to become effective mentors for women staff and research students
- transferred best practice from mentoring schemes across Europe
- could not be ignored and would be put into practice
- was a positive step towards the promotion and encouragement of women in SET

'one of the major benefits of the ATHENA mentoring training scheme was to help the institution to re-evaluate existing mentoring practices, norms and values and to open new doors which could facilitate the retention of female academics in SE' - member of the Project Steering Committee

SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

Sheffield Hallam has almost 24,000 students and 3,000 staff and is the country's sixth largest university. The percentage of female undergraduates and postgraduate students ranges between 43% in science and mathematics to 8.5% in engineering. In computing and management there are 33 female teaching staff to 77 male, in science and mathematics 20 females and 62 males, and in engineering 3 females and 93 male teaching staff.

WiTEC

WiTEC is a pan-European network whose aims are to increase the number of girls/women studying and working in SET.

Project Manager Marina Larios, WiTEC, Sheffield Hallam University, City Campus, Sheffield S1 1 WB email m.larios@shu.ac.uk

HR Trainer Olga Lane

Survey analysis, mentoring resources and a summary of the project can be found at www.shu.ac.uk/witec or via www.athena.ic.ac.uk.

Information on the WiTEC European Database of Women Experts in SET is on <http://www.setwomenexperts.org.uk>

BACKGROUND

Research undertaken before the project started showed a great disparity between the numbers of senior male and female staff in SET departments at Sheffield Hallam. From the beginning the project had the support of senior management of the university, who saw the mentoring programme as a positive step towards the promotion and encouragement of women in SET at Sheffield Hallam.

There was a long-standing half-day training in mentoring provided by the staff development unit, but aimed more towards administrative staff. However its existence was unknown within the academic community.

THE PROJECT

Preparatory meetings

As part of their research into the cultures of the SET schools, the project team held meetings with school directors. The meetings also allowed the discussion of the benefit of staff attending mentoring training. All the directors supported the project's aims, and offered opportunities for information on it to be disseminated internally. Feedback showed the impact of these meetings on increasing the credibility of the project.

Meetings also took place with key staff with expertise/knowledge of delivering mentoring training/writing on mentoring. At the meetings, the content of the questionnaire to potential mentees was reviewed to ensure that its results would assist in the development of a mentoring course specific to the needs of Sheffield Hallam.

The project team attended a European training programme provided by the Mellow project (lifelong mentoring of women in technical positions) in the Netherlands. This enabled the transfer of best European practice into the project and illustrated how mentoring could assist women in SET who faced the problems common to women in non-traditional areas.

Questionnaires to academic staff

Five staff (4 women 1 man) were interviewed by the project team for them to gain an idea of the working environment for women in SET, and to see if there were any barriers to women's progress. The results of the interviews were used as the basis of the questionnaire sent to the 463 academic staff in the target schools. The original intention had been to include only women in SET. However, following discussion by the steering group it was agreed to include men. 87 questionnaires were received, a 19% response rate, 66% of the respondents were men 34% women.

The report on the questionnaire was sent to the governors, school directors and staff in SET schools and has generated a lot of interest. The results reflected the profile of respondents, over 60% of whom had worked at Sheffield Hallam for over five years:

- 81% did not have a mentor
- 54% of female respondents felt a mentor would assist their career development
- 40% were interested in attending the training, the main reason for non-attendance was lack of time

This last was critical to the project's success, so the approach taken by school directors was to encourage staff to see the benefits to the school and university of attending the training, for example:

- improved motivation, contribution and retention
- better communication in particular better listening
- a reputation as a caring employer
- better general performance- more for your bucks

This seemed to have the desired effect.

Mentoring training

On the basis of information from the interviews and questionnaires, the team developed a training package which was piloted at the 2 one-day courses run in

summer 2000. A total of 27 staff (18 women and 9 men) were trained. The second course was delivered by a member of the staff development unit who will be responsible for adapting the course to fit into the existing staff development programme.

The training days were opened by key players within the university, a governor, two directors of schools and the director of organisational excellence. The training activities were designed to raise awareness, improve understanding, explore perceptions and attitudes and develop skills. The sessions provided a good opportunity for interaction and networking as individuals shared information and ideas

The training was aimed at potential mentors and senior staff who would be interested in providing mentoring in their own departments. The participants were enthusiastic about taking their knowledge back to their departments and feedback from them on the courses was good:

- *'I feel very excited about taking the ideas back into my own school'*
- *'there are like-minded people to myself in SHU'*
- *'I have realised I have many of the skills and attitudes to be an effective mentor of women in SET and have been an unofficial mentor'*
- *'I had a mentor as part of a professional development course, I found it very useful to bounce ideas off, get advice'*
- *'through my mentoring relationship I have developed self-belief'*
- *'I had a great sense of achievement at seeing a new member of the team passing the problems where I stumbled'*

Evaluation

This was an important on-going part of the project, in order to:

- check perceptions of the project's aims and what counted as successes
- confirm whether best use was being made of available resources
- determine whether institutional structures, forces and processes were helping/hindering progress
- check on the dissemination strategy

LEARNING/TRANSFERABLE MESSAGES

The diagnostic process (the preparatory meetings) was the first intervention in developing ownership of the project. Another result was an acknowledgement by senior staff of the existence of the problem.

As comments of school directors showed *'the culture is not seen as supportive of women in academic posts, and some female staff think that they need to prove themselves as being a great deal better than their male colleagues in order to be promoted'* *'I think the project could be interesting for staff as we would like to change the situation on the number of females in the school'*

Among the lessons learnt during the project were:

- equal opportunities was seen as threatening, there was resistance and unconscious defence – care was required in formulating questions and presenting evidence/data
- the response from male and female academic staff to involvement in a project which highlighted the under-representation of women in SET was enthusiastic
- academic staff saw mentoring as a tool to assist women in their career development
- good communication between the project team and school directors were important to the development of insight and trust by the directors
- support from the Board of Governors was important in terms of ensuring wide dissemination and interest from senior levels
- marketing support helped the dissemination of the project at school and university levels
- dissemination is critical in promoting ownership among key players
- the involvement of school directors in shaping the project gave them ownership
- local ownership of mentoring was essential and seen as more valuable than HR ownership

- WiTEC as a specialist unit was a facilitator - the project was not seen as a competition between schools and was taken seriously as an equal opportunities project
- the steering group added value by opening doors and providing senior level support

Lessons on mentoring emerged during the training sessions:

- potential mentees lack the confidence to participate
- mentoring is a powerful one to one relationship open to abuse
- male mentors can offer strategies for success 'in male clubs' where women need to learn these strategies to succeed
- women have different experience of life/work balance. A mentee may need men's strategies and/or women's strategies
- time is the limited resource for all involved
- mentoring is a two way relationship with both parties benefiting
- mentoring is active listening/ finding out what is really being said
- there is a lack of understanding among certain groups of positive discrimination measures for women

OUTCOMES

An important step was the acknowledgement by senior management of the under-representation of women in SET, specifically of senior women in SET (there were not enough senior women in SET to be mentors) and an increased awareness of the barriers to women's career progression in SET and:

- the identification of the need for an informal network of senior women
- a women's forum will be set up in the university by a member of the project steering group
- recognition of the need to set up a long term organisational structure to make mentoring happen, with directors of schools responsible

- an interactive bulletin board and chat line for mentors and mentees has been established
- the mentoring training course is now an integral part of the staff development programme
- the project has been disseminated on a European level through the WiTEC network
- the training package will be available on request

THE FUTURE

The project team is discussing with the Vice-Chancellor and the university's human resources department the embedding and linkage of mentoring with other university initiatives, and:

- the barriers to women's career progression in SET, developing solutions and involving directors of schools in policy changes on e.g. recruitment and retention.
- establishing a network of women working in SET
- the possibility of cross-European mentoring relationships is being explored

Sheffield Hallam's Vice-Chancellor speaking at the recent re-launch at the DTI of the WiTEC European data base of women experts in SET confirmed that *'mentoring has always been a part of the University's approach to recruiting new staff but has not been followed through consistently across the institution. It has to become more systematically embedded in our broader HR strategies designed to deliver our commitment to equality and diversity on the ground'*