

# DRAW - THE DEVELOPMENT AND RETENTION OF ACADEMIC WOMEN AT HWU



The aim of the Heriot-Watt University project, supported by the 2000 Athena Development Programme, was to find out why women academics and researchers left the university, and if there were any barriers that prevented them seeking promotion, undertaking development activities, and ultimately remaining at Heriot-Watt.

The project was driven by concerns at the number of women leaving the university in recent years, particularly contract research staff and the need to improve their development, promotion and retention; so the project team's initial objectives were to:

- consult women academics and researchers in all departments to identify:
  - reasons for women not seeking promotion
  - reasons why women might leave the university
  - other barriers to their career development
- consult with heads of departments (HODs) to find barriers they could identify
- make women more aware of promotion procedures and make the procedures more transparent
- make exit interviews a more formal procedure

## HERIOT-WATT UNIVERSITY

Heriot-Watt University (HWU) is a technology-based, research-led university with science and engineering highly represented. It has 15,000 students, of which some 9,000 are distance learning students, and 600 academic and research staff over two main campuses, one at Riccarton in Edinburgh and the other in Galashiels. Female representation ranges from 31% in economics and social science, to 0.1% in engineering and 0.06% in science. At professorial level the percentage of women ranges from 12% in economics and social science to 0.05% in engineering and 0% in science. There are no women in the university's senior management group.

### Project Team

Project Director	Dr Liz Elvidge Academic Staff Development Officer University of Cambridge formerly HWU
Project Officer	Suzanne Massie, Staff Learning and Development Unit
HWU Athena Co-ordinator	Professor Raffaella Ocone
Steering Committee	Professor John Simmons (Chair) Liz Lister, Professor Patrick O'Farrell, Angela Roberts
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## BACKGROUND

Heriot-Watt's strategic plan for 1999/00 to 2002/03 stated its commitment to 'being recognised as an Equal Opportunities employer'. One of its key objectives was to 'promote wider access to the university by increasing the participation of under-represented groups'. Since September 1999 recruitment and selection courses have been offered to HODs and all staff involved in recruitment. HWU launched a new equal opportunities policy in June 2000 which required HODs to develop action plans for their departments and included a review of existing policies and procedures to ensure that their language and operation avoided inappropriate discrimination.

## THE PROJECT

### Questionnaire to women and consultations with heads of departments

The first task was to identify the barriers to the retention, promotion and development of women. In November 2000 a questionnaire on promotion, development, career issues and experiences was sent out. Given the small numbers involved it went to all women academics and researchers, not just those in science, engineering and technology (SET). The response rate was high: 66% overall, with a 77% response from the engineering faculty. The themes that emerged from the responses included:

#### support for women and awareness of the barriers they face

- a variation in support between colleagues / HODs for development activities
- a lack of role models and '*persons to discuss gender related concerns*'
- some women had never received an appraisal
- choosing to have a family was recognised as having an impact on research activity

- a quarter of women academics expected to be working elsewhere within 5 years
- some women had experienced inappropriate language/comments
- comments included
  - '*I generally find female academics more friendly, supportive and generally more concerned with one as an individual*'
  - '*I think Heriot-Watt is very supportive towards women, I also feel that if I ever had a complaint, this would be taken very seriously. I work (now) in a very young team so the gender issue is not on the agenda as in the 'older' departments*'
  - '*It is not so much my attitude towards men, but their attitude to women. They are simply not used to female presence – which is bad for the atmosphere*'

#### promotion

- women's knowledge of promotion procedures was sketchy
- the fairness and transparency of promotion procedures eg knowing the membership of promotions panel and the promotion criteria used
- again the comments from women were illuminating
  - '*procedures do not entirely determine promotion – they are fair on paper*'
  - '*male staff tend to delegate more admin and it's difficult to say no in case it affects job prospects*'
  - '*the promotion prospects of all staff are poor. There have been few promotions in our Department in recent years, the procedures have been poorly followed with little or no feedback which is discouraging to all staff*'

#### the old boy network

- women respondents were quite outspoken
  - '*seems evident in higher management and research hierarchy*'

- *'always male managers, social friends given interesting task'*
- *'upper management group completely male and perceived like a club'*

At the same time, the project team met HODs to consult them on their perceptions of the attitudes, behaviour, barriers and systems in place at HWU. They echoed many of the views of the women and agreed:

- promotion was based on research, not teaching, and on the number of publications – this affected both those taking maternity leave and those coming from industry
- maternity leave was an issue, there was a conflict for women in their 30s, the best time to gain promotion but also the time when planning a family is an issue
- there was some inappropriate language and behaviour, but it tended to be 'old school' and would eventually disappear
- the small number of women academics was a problem but there was a need to recruit the best person for the job without positive discrimination

However HODs did not see barriers within their own departments. They viewed the attendance of their staff on developmental courses positively. This conflicted with information from the women's questionnaires.

## Report to Principal's away weekend

The project team reported their preliminary findings at the Principal's away weekend (February 2001) attended by senior university managers and HODs. After the team's presentation there was a discussion which gave the university senior staff the opportunity to:

- give their views and suggestions on how to reduce the barriers
- make suggestions on changes to practices and procedures
- 'own' the solutions which emerged

The key issues they identified and focused on were:

- how to address the problems which arise as a result of maternity leave
- awareness of promotion procedures
- how to create greater transparency of promotion criteria
- strategies to put in place to reduce the number of women academics leaving
- how to get more senior female academics

The senior staff engaged with the topics and the realistic solutions they proposed included:

- departmental seminars on promotion procedures before the promotion round, culminating in celebrating staff who were promoted
- recognising that maternity leave results in reduced research output
- embedding family-friendly policies in HWU
- clarifying the criteria for promotion
- giving feedback to HODs and individuals on promotion outcomes
- including more senior women on decision-making committees
- nurturing HWU's own female staff for future senior roles

The steering committee have included many of these suggestions in their action plan.

## LEARNING/TRANSFERABLE MESSAGES

In addition to the project team the steering committee included two senior male academics, the Dean of the Engineering Faculty and an Assistant Principal, and two women, the Director of Personnel and the Director of Recruitment and Admissions. Their commitment was important to the success of the project. The Personnel Director's involvement was essential to putting together the action plan, much of which needs to be centrally driven with significant Personnel input. The project was able to 'piggy-back' on other

initiatives being developed by Personnel, such as the equal opportunities policy.

Following up the questionnaire with flyers and phone calls to staff who had not returned a form helped to produce a high response rate. However, in such a small institution some women were uncomfortable about documenting their views on barriers, despite the guarantees of anonymity and external independent analysis of the replies.

Taking the initial findings to the Principal's weekend (a major event in the HWU calendar) and getting a 'good slot' was valuable. It gave HODs an early opportunity to come up with and take ownership of their solutions and there is now a general expectation that action will be taken. But there were limitations to what could be changed by the project, solutions for the larger issues of changing the culture proved harder to find.

## OUTCOMES

The steering committee used the key issues identified by HODs together with their suggested solutions and the results from the analysis of the questionnaire as the basis for their action plan:

**staff development** the university's management group to approve a staff development policy and communicate it widely

**role models** investigate a mentoring scheme and invite senior women scientists to talk about their careers

**promotion procedures** disseminate information widely, including departmental briefings by Personnel and review procedures to ensure:

- consistency of criteria between departments
- transparency of criteria
- acknowledgment of career breaks
- better feedback on promotion outcomes

**appraisal** introduce a new appraisal scheme for all categories of staff and in the interim, inform HODs of the expectation that staff are appraised

**retention** the expectation that 25% of women academics will leave HWU in the next five years:

- ask a representative selection of women for their reasons for wanting to leave
- screen exit interview forms to identify issues for women who have already left

**women on appointment and promotion panels** change the constitution of appointment and promotions panels to ensure female membership/presence

**cultural issues including inappropriate use of language** women and HODs to be consulted to identify the issues to be covered in equal opportunities training and official written communications to be reviewed

## THE FUTURE

The action plan and implementation timetable has been agreed. Work has started and most action is due to be completed within the next year. There will be a presentation of the project outcomes to HODs and women academics/researchers when they will be informed of the actions to be taken as a result of their contributions, comments and suggestions.

HWU will contribute to the development of a UK Athena action implementation programme starting in autumn 2001.