

LOCAL ACADEMIC WOMEN'S NETWORKS IN SET - LAWNS

The Athena 2000 Development Programme awarded small grants to set up five Local Academic Women's Networks (LAWNs) based in the Universities of East Anglia, Leeds, Loughborough, Plymouth and St Andrews.

The LAWNs are based on self-identified groups of women, including academics in science, engineering and technology (SET) and allied disciplines, who are committed to the aims of the Athena Project: 'the advancement of women in SET in higher education and a significant increase in the number of women recruited to the top posts'. They have the support and commitment from the senior management of the participating HEIs, external partners from other HEIs, research institutions and local industry.

LAWNs have their own aims, which include:

- raising the profile of women academics locally
- promoting the work of less experienced women researchers
- the improvement of institutional practice in the support offered to research staff
- increased cross-disciplinary collaborative opportunities for researchers
- increased associations between academia and industry
- sharing information, ideas and good practice
- encouragement for the appointment of women on to university committees
- the promotion of regional links

LAWNs programmes include:

- seminar programmes showcasing women academics' work
- workplace shadowing
- discussion seminars for (potential) returners/part timers/job sharers
- research seminars/meetings to identify/generate cross-disciplinary research opportunities
- seminars for women undergraduate and graduate students
- conferences for women in the early years of their academic careers
- workshops on writing successful research grant proposals

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EAST ANGLIA LAWN

The East Anglia LAWN is based at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Its target group is women contract research staff and academic staff in the first three years of appointment. It builds on ResNet, the network, which includes the Institute for Food Research and the John Innes Centre, set up by UEA as part of the Athena 1999 Development Programme. The distinctive characteristic of the ResNet LAWN events has been the emphasis on role models, on women talking directly and honestly about their career experience and providing information and opportunities for skills development. It makes a powerful combination.

In addition to its extensive local programme ResNet organised two regional network events in 2000/01. The first conference was on how women can succeed in gaining European Union Framework 5 Funding, sponsored by the DTI. It was successful with 35 women attendees who appreciated the chance to find out about the benefits and process. They were also encouraged to offer themselves as expert evaluators and several have since done so, thus gaining valuable experience of the funding process.

The second conference was in Cambridge, sponsored by Pfizer with a programme designed to give participants the opportunity to:

- do some career stocktaking
- think about the implications of an academic or research career
- find out about other career options
- network with other women scientists from the region

The 50 participants came from a variety of science backgrounds, from postgraduates to senior scientists. Their evaluations were positive - they appreciated the relaxed all-women atmosphere with opportunities to network with others in different fields of research. Comments from participants included:

'opportunity for network was brilliant. More sessions local and regional, with longer breaks would be great' 'it would be useful to run this conference once a year. This was a very helpful and thought provoking daya great day put together with a lot of care and consideration.'

The Future

As a follow-up to the career conference the ResNet web site will include full details of some of the workshops. Several of the workshop sessions, limited by time constraints, will be followed up with longer individual sessions offered at UEA (places may be offered to other institutions in the region). Other possibilities include joining an EU funded network in order to share their experience in establishing and sustaining a local network.

EAST MIDLANDS LAWN

The East Midlands LAWN is a regional consortium based at Loughborough. It developed from the Nottingham/Loughborough skills development and mentoring initiative under the 1999 Athena Development Programme. They were joined by De Montfort, Leicester and Nottingham Trent Universities. Together they aim to establish a network of women in SET with a focus on providing support for women in submitting successful research grant proposals.

Their steering group developed a statement of commitment, which was signed by their Vice-Chancellors:

'It is the policy of each of the universities in the Network to maintain the highest standards in equality of opportunity in employment. No person shall be discriminated against by reason of gender, sexual orientation, race, marital status, national origin, ethnic origin, nationality, religion or disability. All decisions take in respect of recruitment, promotion and training shall have regard only to the requirements of the job.'

Training and support mechanisms are recognised as one means of fulfilling equal opportunities policies for universities, by enabling individuals to realise their potential in all areas of their work. Women academics comprise one group that would benefit from such support, especially in developing their research profile and finding opportunities.

We are therefore committed to ensuring that the East Midlands Universities Local Area Women's Network supports women academics in their personal and career development, primarily in the field of science, engineering and technology.'

The East Midlands LAWN aims to:

- identify source performance data to support institutional performance measurement and benchmarking
- facilitate institutional training and development
- establish an annual conference and networking event
- provide ongoing networking potential through a web site and discussion lists

Their programme concentrates on developing women's capability, competence, motivation and self-confidence.

To identify common concerns/interests for their regional conference, the HEIs all held workshops on the issues hindering the success of women in SET in their own institutions. The conference 'How to succeed in winning grants and developing a successful research portfolio' was attended by a wide range of women academics from all the HEIs. The programme included presentations, workshops and plenaries on the practical issues of initiating and leading a consortia grant application, writing grant applications, the politics of funding, interdisciplinary research, developing a research career and working in partnership with industry. The day was structured to provide good opportunities for networking and sharing experience.

An evening reception and poster session concluded a successful day.

The important messages from the conference were that sharing models of success and providing successful role models as speakers were, as always, inspirational. Equally important was the continued growth of informal networks which it is hoped will provide a sound basis for future collaboration. Feedback included

'so nice to realise problems were shared.' 'I feel I have more confidence to go for it!' 'It is encouraging to see women at the top who you can aspire to be like but who also get the rejections but treat the experience in a more positive way than I would...very useful as a new researcher to learn about the 'rules' and politics of research' 'it encouraged me to seek out research opportunities more actively around my own interests' 'it will inspire me, not to work any harder (that wouldn't be possible) but to value myself more'

The Future

The conference proceedings should be published in the near future. The East Midlands LAWN hopes to hold a conference on a similar theme in 2002 and is talking to the Athena Project about producing a learning resource pack for use by other groups of women in SET based on its work to date.

NORTHERN LAWN

Northern LAWN was set up in 1999 by young female academics at Leeds University Business School, Bradford School of Management and Manchester Business School to run research seminars and offer a support network for its relatively inexperienced members. Since its reincarnation under Athena the network's membership has extended across Yorkshire and Lancashire. Northern LAWN's target membership is women researchers and lecturers in SET and associated disciplines. Its programme in 2000-2001 included:

- quarterly seminars delivered by respected women academics and practitioners open to all university staff, students and other interested parties
- quarterly networking meetings to identify opportunities for research collaboration and new research initiatives and sharing of best practice
- a seminar 'Career opportunities and challenges in academia: A female perspective' for undergraduates and taught postgraduates to encourage careers in academia. This highly interactive half-day event included workshops on 'a day in the life of an academic' 'perspectives on being a doctoral student' and 'developing an academic career: cv and interview tips'. This proved an ideal opportunity for those who had little knowledge of what an academic career entails, but who were nonetheless interested in the possibility, to learn more from those early in their careers. Feedback from participants was positive

*'unique and interesting seminar'
'I enjoyed it and it was very useful, thank you'*

There appears to be no shortage of women in Northern HEIs interested in joining LAWNS. They come from a range of disparate departments and institutions and find out about its activities through word-of-mouth. Face-to-face contact has been the best way to promote the network. New contacts are usually invited to meet existing members before the next scheduled formal meeting. Offering a cohesive and practical network for these individuals has been a challenge, but the diversity of the group is also one of its strengths.

The Future

The careers seminar for students looks set to become a regular event. Plans include continuing the seminar programme and holding them at new

institutions to increase the scope of the networking opportunities and potential for future collaboration.

SOUTH WEST LAWN

The South West LAWN is based at the University of Plymouth and builds on the existing WEST group (women in science engineering and technology). It was driven by their concerns over the research profile of women who 'were not good at pushing themselves forward'. In a sample of biological research seminars over the previous two years there were only 2 women speakers out of a total of 27, despite the 50:50 balance at undergraduate and post-graduate levels.

The LAWN aims to raise the profile of women researchers both locally and nationally by working with other Athena networks across the country and with local industry and research institutes to provide a programme of seminars for women researchers to share their research with male and female colleagues. In putting their seminar programme together the LAWN aimed for a mix of speakers from different disciplines and backgrounds, not all from academia, and with different levels of experience. This gave young researchers the opportunity to make themselves known as well as providing a platform for more experienced high profile speakers. Their programme included:

- seminars to promote women's research in science and technology
- a shadowing scheme for women students considering careers in SET
- discussion groups for part timers and recent returners

Eight meetings were held, refreshments were provided which made sure that participants networked. Attendance averaged from 10 to 15, with one meeting attracting 30 people. The relatively small numbers have encouraged a good level of discussions.

WEST ran:

- a successful Great Egg Race in National Science Week, won by an all girls school
- an Athena stall at the student volunteer fair and collected a number of students who were interested in the shadowing scheme which the LAWN is planning to set up in the 2001/02 academic year.

In its first year the LAWN has achieved its initial objectives:

- a flourishing WEST society positioned to take forward the issues of women in SET
- a cross-faculty network to support and increase the profile of women
- a more positive image of the university as an employer of women

Athena has already raised the profile of women in the university.

The co-ordinator has been appointed to the university's equal opportunities committee and was asked to be on her faculty promotions panel. Four out of the five women in her department are now PLs.

The Future

Following a discussion forum led by Personnel on 'Part-time and Job-sharing: pros and cons' the LAWN, with input from Personnel will run a series of discussion groups for returners in 2001/02 as well as some seminars on women and promotions and equal opportunities issues.

The shadowing scheme will start with students in the autumn

The co-ordinator has been invited by the EPSRC to attend their grant awarding committee as an observer and the EPSRC is sending someone to lead a discussion on grant applications.

ST ANDREWS LAWN

An informal network of women scientists conceived their LAWN as a way to promote small changes in the St Andrews' culture and to alter the attitudes of the male-dominated science faculties. Their approach was to

- raise the awareness among their predominately male academic community, of the UK pool of highly qualified women who are potential candidates for academic posts
- raise the visibility of women scientists to those in the position to nominate them to significant local or UK committees
- have an impact on female students and researchers at the crucial stage of choosing whether to pursue a longer term academic career in science

The LAWN supported a high profile lecture series by successful British women scientists. Women speakers were singularly absent from the existing seminar programmes, which were seen to provide opportunities for recognition of research achievements and for new collaboration. In the previous year 4 of the 7 schools had no female seminar speaker, in 2000/01, thanks to Athena, all the schools had at least 2 female speakers.

The seminar organisers chose and invited the speakers. Their invitations included information on the Athena Project. This proved an inducement for busy women scientists to make the journey to St Andrews. The seminars were advertised in school newsletters/websites and email shots to St Andrews and Dundee. The local and regional newspapers each did a feature on the series. Feedback from seminar organisers was positive *'people saw it as prestigious and wanted to support it.'* One was disappointed *'there were no women in the audience'*.

Social gatherings after the seminars allowed women scientists to meet more male colleagues and to talk to them about their research and the difficulties

facing women academics. It was hoped that not only would the local men be made aware of the need for change but also that the visitors would initiate similar good practice in their own institutions. There is no doubt that the programme has sown the seeds for future change. It has:

- increased representation of women seminar speakers in the majority of departments
- increased awareness of the low number of female academics and seminar speakers
- fostered visibility across the faculty for women scientists at St Andrews

The Future

Most seminar organisers have expressed willingness to continue to promote the inclusion of women in their future programmes. The LAWN plans to maintain contacts with women scientists to encourage similar initiatives elsewhere and is planning to expand the concept to send promising post-doctoral researchers and very junior academics to other universities' seminar programmes.

IN CONCLUSION

The first five Athena LAWNS came from different roots. They targeted different levels of women in SET, from a variety of HE institutions, with a wide range of activities and programmes designed to meet their different aims. They all met their original objectives and are continuing into the 2001/02 academic year with new initiatives, supported by their institutions and the energy of the women who have taken the lead.

Informal networks of women brought together with a purpose and clear short term objectives can be a powerful force for change at local level. The support they provide for their members and for those who take part in their activities is both needed and welcomed. Support from senior colleagues, both male and female, in the host institutions for their activities has been encouraging, particularly in terms of attendance at eg research seminars. It is important to secure the support of those as high in the hierarchy as possible. Just trying to chip away from the bottom has not proved especially successful in raising LAWNS' profiles.

The Dean of Science at the reception to mark the first of the series of Athena lectures at St Andrews said

'The male dominated academic system in which we operate was largely designed by men for the benefit of men. It is one in which characteristics more typical of men such as competitiveness and aggressiveness, are rewarded, while those associated more often with women, such as co-operativeness and collegiality are much less likely to lead to success. I hope that things are changing, but there is much data to suggest that the academic world is not an easy one for women to succeed in.'

The five LAWNS have made a difference, in a number of small ways academic life has changed for SET women in their institutions. This report celebrates those successes and shows they can be achieved. They all recognise that the momentum of what they have achieved must be maintained. The real measure of their success will only be visible in the medium term as they grow in membership and influence.