

CHALLENGING CULTURE

THE RECTOR'S COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Imperial College won joint second prize in the 2002 Athena Awards for the work of their Rector's Committee on Academic Opportunities.

'We are seeing an increasing number of young women academic staff who are reporting stress'. College Doctor to Personnel Director - 1998. *'There are very few women to interact with and the men are very competitive'*. Voices from Women in Science, South Kensington Association of Women in Science and Engineering - 1997.

These two quotes formed the backdrop to a ground breaking discussion in 1999 by College Heads of Department about the under-representation of women academics. It was the first time that senior members of College had ever discussed this issue. The discussion recognised that many issues, such as the long hours culture, child-care and work-life balance, affected men as well as women. Nevertheless, they felt that women probably experienced these more intensively than men and that Imperial should initiate some action to address these issues. The response was to establish the Committee on Academic Opportunities to create and ensure a level playing field for women academics at Imperial.

The Committee on Academic Opportunities has a single focus and purpose: to explore and understand the barriers to academic women's career progression, to take action by removing any barriers that may exist in appointment or career advancement for highly qualified women and to ensure that the numbers of such qualified women are as high as possible.

The Committee reports direct to the Rector. Its members are senior academics, an academic with current family responsibilities, a College Doctor / Counsellor and the Director of Human Resources. This high level support is critical. Challenging the traditional culture is a constantly recurring theme of all of the work commissioned and supported by the Committee. This takes time and has to be addressed at a number of levels and in a number of ways. But, without the clear support of the most senior members of the College, none of these efforts would have succeeded.

IMPERIAL COLLEGE

Imperial College is a major institution of science, engineering, medicine and management. As in comparable institutions the proportion of women declines with seniority. Imperial has 7,244 undergraduates of whom 36% are women, 2,881 postgraduates - 37% women, 1117 academic staff - 17% women and 404 professors - 10% women.

Further Information

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THE RECTOR'S COMMITTEE

The Committee recognised that there was unlikely to be any single factor or barrier which had led to the under-representation of women in the academic ranks of the College and began by commissioning an external survey on women's perceptions of the factors affecting the progress of their careers. Three main issues were identified and action has been taken to address each of them:

- the perception that College was not supportive to women
- poor internal communications about, for example, maternity rights and family friendly policies
- deep concerns about the implications for a successful academic career of taking maternity leave

Among the actions which the Committee initiated in response to this survey were:

- joining Opportunity 2000 - to signal the College's commitment to the issue
- the creation of Elsie Widdowson Fellowships – to provide academic women returning from maternity leave with a sabbatical from teaching and administration for up to one year after the birth of their baby
- a pilot mentoring scheme, supported by the 1999 Athena Development Programme (Athena Report 3)

Following the pilot mentoring scheme, a College-wide mentoring scheme for young women and men academics and final year post-docs has been established. Mentoring is now embedded within departments. Heads of department nominate mentors and introduce and offer the scheme to potential mentees. This indicates senior commitment and engagement with the issue and signals that it is culturally 'acceptable' to have a

mentor. The scheme is 'managed' by the Committee, which receives regular reports on its progress.

The College committed to continue any activities which the 1999 Athena pilot found to be helpful. Consequently a second initiative was introduced in response to the feedback that a lot of College women felt isolated. It was decided to inaugurate an annual Athena Lecture on the theme of Women in SET, to provide a focus at least once a year for the women of College to meet.

The first lecture in 2001 was given by Professor Lotte Bailyn of MIT (Athena Occasional Paper 2). To give presence to the first lecture and engage a variety of people in the issue, Professor Bailyn spent a week at Imperial during which she:

- held discussions with both senior and junior women about the work at MIT
- had meetings with the Rector and Principal of the Medical School and made presentations to Heads of Departments

Following this, the Committee decided to undertake a survey of senior women to see if the issues of space, salary and rate of career progression identified at MIT were replicated at Imperial. They were not, but what did emerge was a clear feeling that the interests of women academics were not well represented at the higher level in College. This made the Committee realise that it had not put sufficient effort into publicising itself and its activities to one of its major constituencies. Consequently it now emails regular reports of its activities to all women academics. And in 2003 it will host an 'Academic Women @ Imperial' week which will include a half day Forum and the 2003 Athena Lecture.

THE COMMITTEE'S SUCCESS

The Committee, with its specific focus on the recruitment, retention, reward and development of women academics, is deliberately a separate activity beyond and distinct from College equality and diversity activities. For Imperial this separation was appropriate. The creation of a Rector's Committee (of which there are few) signalled how seriously it regards the under-representation of women.

'Support at the highest level in the College has been crucial for our success. It is important to work with the culture of the institution: our actions fit our culture. The way we do things might not work in every institution'

The Committee recognised the need to tackle the two fundamentally important groups of issues, the nature of the academic career and the culture of the institution. They knew that unless they took action on both at the institutional level, they would not achieve long term success.

'Increasing the number of women academics is about changing the culture of the College. The existence of the Committee provides academic women with the assurance that their needs are being addressed at the highest level and is the College focal point for advancing the position of women in SET'

The Committee's impact is on-going and cumulative. What it is doing is making an impact:

- it has a multi-dimensional approach to the issues
- it has followed through its base line research

- it has identified the key building blocks – mentoring, improving communications and networking
- it has the clear and unambiguous support of the head of the institution - the Rector
- it has engaged all senior managers and senior academics
- it is an on-going activity which through its cumulative activities and presence is challenging the traditional culture of the College
- it is a structure which is appropriate to Imperial College

'No one action on its own fixes the problem. We are changing the nature of the debate and beginning to move the culture to make it more friendly but we still have a mountain to climb'

'In the years since the Committee was established it has moved the issue from something we were nervous about raising with the Heads of Department to something which is now much more mainstream'

Recently the Heads of the four newly created College Faculties have been invited to meet the Committee to discuss the position of women in their Faculty. The response has been enthusiastic. This is a measure of how far the Committee has moved the culture of the College.

From a ground breaking initial conversation to an enthusiastic and open response in 5 years is a significant achievement. The Rector's Committee has shifted the discussion of the position of women academics from the periphery to the centre of College concern.

THE FUTURE

Although the Committee does not expect all PhD students to want to become academics, they believe that undertaking a post-doc indicates some interest in an academic career. They are concerned at the fairly significant losses of women at each of these stages. So, in 2002 the Committee commissioned a pilot study of career choice based on an engineering department, which was seen to be 'women friendly' with a higher proportion of female academics than other engineering departments. The survey explored factors affecting the career choices of PhD students about to complete their theses and post-docs whose current contracts were about to end. The survey will be repeated across a larger sample in 2003.

Both College and the Committee have audited the College promotion process which allows for self-nomination as well as departmental nomination. In 2002 the Committee reviewed the relative success rate of female and male applicants and of self versus departmental nominations. They found no evidence of gender bias in

these processes. However they did identify different practices in the operation of departmental panels and will be identifying and publicising examples of departmental 'best practice'.

The survey of senior women undertaken to see how far Imperial replicated MIT suggested anecdotally that women might progress rather more slowly than men so the Committee will be sponsoring a staff development programme for academics in mid-career. The programme is designed to ensure that staff at this level think proactively and strategically about the next stage of their career - promotion to a chair.

Imperial will use its Pearson prize money to commission a work of art to celebrate women in SET and to endow two prizes, one of which, open to all, will be for the individual who makes the greatest contribution to the further advancement of women in science, engineering, technology and medicine, the second to young scientists and engineers for the best presentation by a PhD student awarded on the basis of posters at the Graduate School Exhibition.