

Getting our own house in order – using IR to tackle female progression

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Coventry University has joined 96 other higher education institutions signing up to the Athena Swan scheme which recognises and tries to address the personal and structural obstacles to women progressing to senior academic science careers. Targeted institutional research is a key determinant of success for such schemes, with institutional data used to identify issues and track changes: Its value is in informing where resources should be deployed, assessing the effectiveness of policy, practice and interventions and in benchmarking against sector averages.

Since its launch in 2005 the Athena Swan awards scheme has attracted membership from more than half of qualifying institutions and research shows membership and participation in the scheme's awards programme correlates with developments in both practices and culture (Hawkes 2011). Practical measures include the introduction of more flexible working and other organisational change; cultural changes include greater acknowledgement of gender equality and career progression as an issue.

While acknowledging the progress that participation in the Athena Swan programme can encourage, challenges remain. These include greater transparency of accessing committee positions, decision-making criteria around promotions and a coherent policy across different divisions and faculties.

Like other award entrants, Coventry University's application was backed by an action plan in which it set out its steps to address the change in cultures and removal of barriers

necessary to address unequal representation of women in science. Often universities address issues of inequality and inclusion as academic research themes; the award encourages the institution to use this research to inform policy and practice.

Coventry's institutional research to address the issue involves interviewing female employees to identify reasons for (and ways to overcome) imbalances of female academics in science, technology, engineering, medicine and mathematics (STEMM) disciplines at Reader or Professor level compared to their male counterparts.

The goal is to deliver recommendations which the university can implement to reduce this disparity. One of the goals of Coventry University is to deliver research excellence with impact; and this includes the institutional research that we engage in.

Existing literature suggests the problem is an international one and affects science careers generally as well as those in universities. However, in this instance, universities are well placed as change agents to address these issues. STEMM careers have particular challenges for women – typically the workplace is portrayed as having a masculine culture and demanding work patterns (Herman and Webster 2010). Despite significant advances in terms of encouraging paternity leave and supporting those taking breaks to care for others, we know that women bear the brunt of the carer responsibility in our society. We are also aware of the 'maternal pay penalty' experienced by women throughout their careers; e.g. to the difficulty of maintaining of a publishing record. All this results in a 'care ceiling', rather than a 'glass ceiling' (ibid).

This is not just about more having more crèches. Women university staff report failure of their institutions to identify disparity as a problem, leadership and education of senior staff as main reasons for lack of progress in senior imbalance, plus a lack of interventions to improve mentoring and removal of structural career impediments (Cropsey et al. 2008).

Duberley (2007) argues that the emphasis on winning funding disadvantages women wishing to achieve senior positions. In a letter to Times Higher Education more than 50 Cambridge University academics called for a change to the criteria for senior academic appointments, which currently has too narrow a focus on publications and research grants. Instead they call for widening the criteria to include a fuller reflection of academics' working lives, including teaching and outreach work (Coughlan 2014). Findings from existing academic research suggest that the reasons women leave STEMM subjects in particular are

varied, and that nationally imposed policies would fail to cater for this (Herman and Webster 2010). While there is great value in sharing data and ideas around best practice at a sector level, the solutions adopted should be targeted at the particular needs of the institution.

Universities should be the epitome of learning organisations and yet it appears that we have yet to learn what it would take to retain the balance of men and women who study STEMM subjects as under and postgraduates as they progress into STEMM careers at universities. Coventry proposes to use institutional research as a tool to inform practice at the local level, in order to drill down to discover the individual institution and individual level reasons for progression gaps.

Coventry University hopes to have identified measures to address its STEMM gap by summer 2014. For further details contact Christine.Broughan@coventry.ac.uk or Caroline.Wilson@coventry.ac.uk.

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