

INCLUSIVE COMMITTEES

The aim of the University of Luton project, supported by the 2000 Athena Development Programme, was to develop, implement and evaluate systems to ensure the appropriate representation of women academics on university committees and to:

- ensure that the committees functioned in a manner which was inclusive
- document the processes and feed the lessons from it into the university's committee systems and to the HE sector generally

The project was designed to:

- evaluate current practice and the inclusivity of committee operations
- develop, offer and evaluate a training programme for committee chairs
- establish a network for women members of committees

The university recognised that committee participation was an intrinsic part of academic life. However, despite its commitment to equal opportunities, the issue of gender representation and imbalance in the university structures had not previously been properly considered. The university also recognised that:

- committee representation was not wholly within the university's gift, it was largely determined by democratic or quasi-democratic processes
- it lacked tried and tested processes and 'case-studies' to inform the changes needed
- the process of change would require encouragement and would need to be evaluated
- much depended on the extent to which chairs of committees could be persuaded both of the importance of the issue and their own role as key players. They would need:
 - help to understand the issues
 - the tools and training to manage change and champion equal opportunities
- the women who managed to secure representation on committees might find unreasonable burdens and expectations placed upon them

THE UNIVERSITY OF LUTON

The University of Luton is a modern, innovative university, with some 12,000 students from over 100 countries. Luton is committed to mass higher education, acknowledging its responsibility to prepare a highly educated workforce for the competitive global economy. The student community is diverse with well over 20% from ethnic minorities and many from non-traditional educational backgrounds. Just over half the students are women. There are some 520 academic staff of whom 220 are women. Of the 101 academics in science, engineering and technology (SET) in the Faculty of Science, Technology and Design (STD) 32 are women.

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Website www.luton.ac.uk/athena gives more information on the project and will include the training course for committee chairs and other associated developments

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BACKGROUND

Luton had an established valuing diversity committee which monitored equal opportunities targets and a human resource group with an overview of equal opportunities relating to staff development and good practice. The university had in place robust policies, for example on recruitment, stress management, and work-life balance, and effective procedures on bullying and harassment. The university was committed to increasing the representation of women at senior management and heads of department (HODs) levels, and its gender/ethnic balance was improving at senior and middle management levels.

In 1999 the Dean of STD established a women's forum to provide mutual support and improve the access, participation and promotion of women. The rationale for the forum was the under-representation of women in first academic appointments and in the directorate and senior management groups. The results of the forum's discussions were forwarded to the directorate. The forum identified two important barriers to women's full participation in the university and to internal promotion:

- the use of internal secondments
- the membership and conduct of committees

It was perceived that poorly defined institutional practice led to use of the 'old boy' network for internal secondments and activities such as selection for committee chairs. The forum believed that because these processes were not governed by explicit university rules (unlike recruitment) opportunities for full participation were not available to women. This further impacted their careers, as it made it more difficult to build a good CV.

In January 2001 the university decided to reduce its faculty structure from four to three, a change involving the move of two science departments into a health and social science faculty. The gender balance in the new faculty will be very

different from STD and the opportunity will be taken to analyse the experience and impact of moving into a new 'female' faculty culture.

THE PROJECT

The project started by exploring what equal opportunities good practice in committee structures, membership and procedures existed elsewhere in HE/ other public sector organisations. The responses received suggested this was a neglected area. Considerable interest was expressed in the good practice that would emerge from the project.

Analysis of the representation of women on university committees

This was more difficult than anticipated, as the figures from different years were not comparable. They did however show considerable differences between faculties/functions - women represented 70% of the membership of the mitigating circumstances committee and other 'administrative' committees, but only 13% of the research committee. 222 people (92 women, 130 men) filled 379 committee places. Men were more often on more than one committee, which intensified the 'closed network'.

The women's forum

The STD women's forum gave rise to the project by its identification of the barriers to women's participation in university life. The university recognised that the forum would need to change in the new faculty structure, so it was decided to evaluate the forum's contribution and revisit its concerns and recommendations. The forum had expressed concerns over the lack of scrutiny of committee appointments and that participative decision making required more consensual management approaches. It recommended that:

- HODs include management development and explicit recognition of management experience in annual

reviews for all staff and in support of succession planning

- structures be put in place to facilitate appointments as external examiners
- mechanisms for selecting committee members be made open and accountable with clarity as to whether representatives were appointed or elected
- appointments to committees be a fixed term with 'rolling' replacements to allow more staff to participate
- elected posts be by secret ballot, with numbers of votes not disclosed to encourage participation

Questionnaire and focus groups

A questionnaire was sent to women academics. It covered issues of promotion, progression, committee participation and explored women's experiences and perspectives on working in the university. The number of replies received was disappointing but not surprising in the light of the difficulties being experienced by the university at the time. However the qualitative information from the replies was valuable. As the university situation calmed (with the emergence of the new faculty structure) the project decided to use its analysis of replies with focus groups of representative women to translate the issues into an action agenda. In so doing a number of perceptions were identified on career progression and promotion procedures, some of which were equally relevant to men's careers:

promotion procedures

- inconsistencies in their application *'the procedures are fair; I am not sure the execution of them is so fair'*
- the need to be more transparent and explicit *'publish clear guidelines about routes to promotion and stick to them! without changing the goal posts all the time'*
- staff need to be more aware of them *'as I do not know what they are I cannot comment objectively, however the requirements on flexibility of working for more senior*

appointments... can make things very difficult for women who are also expected to look after children'

- temporary promotions without advertising or competition *'the problem is there are no procedures and published criteria are not widely distributed. It's all cloak and dagger stuff. There is no openness'*

barriers to women's career progression

- high profile work activities/events given to men rather than women *'women in my department were unfairly loaded with teaching and admin(menial) while more high profile work was given to male colleagues'*
- harder to get recognition for work *'I think female academics perceive they are less likely to achieve, therefore they do' 'there is a lot of undermining of women by both men and women. My impression is that men are generally over-estimated and over-praised, even when they are good (they are not necessarily that good) and women are very rarely referred to as good while shortcomings are blown out of proportion '*
- the power of the male-orientated informal networks exclude women tokenism *'I have often been phoned by personnel desperate for a woman for interview and other panels' 'I have been on interview panels just for that reason- a token woman'*
- *'It would help if there were more steps on the career pathway so you could see that if you did xyz you could get promoted'*

LEARNING/TRANSFERABLE MESSAGES

The involvement of the senior Pro Vice-Chancellor as chair of the project committee allowed the university to pick up/ act on issues as they were flagged. She ensured that the university questioned the representation of women on all its committees (where possible making changes for the 2001/02 academic year) and asked the Academic Board to review membership of its committees.

What started as a review of women and faculty committees in SET has flagged a number of significant concerns on university corporate management, some of which are enshrined in the governance requirements for post 1992 universities.

Committees

The university has listened and learned how to ensure that women are appropriately represented on such committees, specifically:

- roles could be moved round more with experience gained by more people
- transparent and democratic procedures would improve opportunities for participation
- all committee meetings will continue to be held in normal working hours, an aspect of the university's committee organisation welcomed by women

The training now being provided for committee chairs is a response to the comments:

- *'weak chairs cannot prevent senior management from dominating'*
- *'often the loudest voice is heard'*
- *'males overall are allowed to speak for longer – are not interrupted'*
- *'often a male chair will disregard what a female member says because of the way it was expressed which is taken as 'over-emotional' or 'taken personally'. This demonstrates a clear lack of understanding of the way women communicate. It is very hurtful and often means that the female doesn't contribute further'*
- *'those of us who are part of or privy to the male network know the issues/ politics around the discussion. The rest of us are excluded'*

OUTCOMES

The project has established the factors inhibiting the effective contribution of women to committees and incorporated its findings into a training programme for committee chairs. The university has recognised that the first step is for a

woman to get herself onto a committee; this itself requires profile/positioning/ confidence/ the right experience/cv. The university is taking action to:

- set targets and monitor representation
- pilot proportional representation on committees in the health and social science faculty
- introduce opportunities for committee observation for men and women

The outcomes the project team hopes for when it reviews progress at the end of 2001/02 academic year are:

- academic committees, both faculty and university represent more appropriately the constituency of women academics
- women committee members report confidence in their ability to operate and be heard in committees and in the conduct of the committees
- committee chairs report favourably on the training received and their own confidence in conducting committee business appropriately
- an encouraging review of committee minutes – the language and the articulation of women's contributions to committee business

THE FUTURE

The processes of achieving organisational change and introducing training for committee chairs are being documented. The resulting good practice guidance will be shared with the sector.

The women's forum will continue with representation from all faculties. Its role will be to monitor progress on committee representation and career development. The intention is to offer guidance and engender an open, supportive organisational culture.

The project team look forward to continuing to work with the Athena Project in developing their action plan on committee representation and on the underlying structural, organisational and procedural barriers to women's careers identified in the project.