

# ADDRESSING THE GENDER IMBALANCE AT QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

Queen's University Belfast won the first prize in the 2002 Athena Awards for the work of their Women's Forum in addressing the gender imbalance at Queen's.

The Women's Forum was set up in September 1999, at the request of the Vice-Chancellor, who called together a group of senior women and encouraged them to set up a forum to investigate gender issues at Queen's. The Forum addresses the issue of gender imbalance by improving the profile and position of women in the University and:

- collects and disseminates the evidence of that imbalance, makes men and women aware of it, and investigates its causes
- provides a forum for women at all levels to voice their concerns
- reinforces, develops and publicises the application of gender-aware and family-friendly policies
- learns from best practice
- draws up action plans and identifies proposals for implementation by the University's senior management

From the beginning, the Forum agreed to go for real change. The members recognised that the process would take time and concentrated their initial efforts on preparing the ground and building the confidence of women, so that they would be willing to put themselves forward for advancement, and preparing them strategically, to be in the right position at the right time with the right experience behind them. The Forum also:

- developed networks to support the efforts of the women of Queen's
- improved the University's commitment to work-life balance and childcare so that women are more able and prepared to invest effort in management
- overhauled the University structures to improve the equality of opportunities for women and monitors the impact
- impressed upon men in managerial positions that it is their responsibility to encourage the women in their departments
- changed the culture within Queen's to be ready for women leaders

## QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

Queen's is one of two universities in Northern Ireland. It is an old and traditional foundation with 3,500 staff and 23,000 students of whom 60% are women. Although women represent 50% of the staff, the representation of women in senior management is low at 17%, 26% of academic staff are women, but only 11% of professors. In SET the position is worse, with a small female undergraduate population, two women professors in science and one in engineering.

### Further Information

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## THE WOMEN'S FORUM

The Forum undertook a listening exercise in Spring 2000 *'for Queen's it was an important organisational moment when the University listened and responded to the 600 women of Queen's who contributed to the initial consultation'* That summer a Gender Initiative Office was opened, and a gender champion, the Director of the Initiative (seconded one day a week), administrator and secretary were appointed. Its agenda was set by the recommendations of the Women's Forum report, to:

- improve the work-life balance e.g. through flexible working
- institute the measures seen as important e.g. central maternity cover and a scheme for returning women
- develop integrated childcare provision
- create improved career opportunities for clerical staff
- develop mentoring of academic women
- maintain the Women's Forum and resource it at a realistic level
- investigate and redress imbalance and monitor equal pay
- make substantial inroads into changing the culture
- strengthen the voice for women in the University
- set targets and timetables
- publish findings, publicise activities, and establish good communications

The Forum developed a wide-ranging and high profile programme of activities, with mentoring and other networking groups, including a professorial group, monthly Forum meetings to monitor progress,

events for International Women's Day, and childcare groups meeting to look at the demand for care and to follow through on recommendations.

Now, two years on, procedures have been overhauled and criteria made more explicit for promotions, professorial banding, discretionary pay, appraisal and appraisal training for heads of school. The infrastructure is in place to encourage women into higher places, including SET, and encompasses:

- equal pay, central maternity cover and flexible working clerical staff - mainstreamed
- academic mentoring - on a three-year cycle
- networking opportunities - provided for different groups of staff.
- the women appointed to key positions, eg convenors of appointments panel, are using their positions to raise gender issues with potential managers
- a register of women willing to serve on University committees
- extension of nursery hours and three weeks added to summer scheme provision

The Queen's cultural environment has changed radically and symbolically - Senate now comprises 41% women, and this increased number of women on the governing body has been matched by the increase in women receiving honorary degrees. There is now the first of many portraits of women hung in the Great Hall and a large canvas representing women of Queen's emerging from the shadows will be mounted on the Council Chamber wall in March 2003.

## QUEEN'S SUCCESS

The Queen's approach is to work simultaneously for the benefit of all women at Queen's, not just the most disadvantaged group in SET, the cohort of potential professors and Pro-Vice-Chancellors, or even just academic women.

Through its many measures the Gender Initiative is changing the culture across the University. It has developed both momentum and support. The initiative works:

- it is supported from the top
- it has the strong backing of 600 women
- its champions generate enthusiasm
- it has a clear reporting route
- it is not locked into line management

Most important of all, Queen's has not imposed solutions but has listened and continues to listen to what the women themselves recommend.

The senior level support is a real investment. The Senior Pro-Chancellor chairs monthly Forum meetings. Three Pro Vice-Chancellors sit on the Forum: this allows an early view of the University's likely reaction to initiatives and a certain steer through the committees. The Vice-Chancellor regularly receives the report of the Director for the Gender Initiative, sometimes one-to-one, sometimes to his committee, or to meetings of his committee with heads of unit.

The Director of Human Resources meets the Director for the Gender Initiative quarterly to discuss mainstreaming. The Gender Initiative reports through the HR Committee to Planning and Resources Committee and Senate.

Each recommendation from the Forum report has its own champion, and a subgroup to support it. Their methodology is to move forward with the support of senior management, the backing of the women of Queen's and, increasingly, with the support of middle management. Together they:

- listen - the 2000 rolling programme of seminars will be repeated in spring 2003
- implement - recommendations from the Forum report are developed and introduced
- mainstream - as each measure goes through the University's committees, plans for mainstreaming it are put into place, often through HR

The monthly University newspaper carries news items, photographs of women (after its first issue was scandalously all-male), a monthly column: a View from the Forum and information on the work of the Forum regularly feature in the University news 'round-up' emailed to all staff.

*'One of the main strengths of the Women's Forum is the fact that it is supported by top management. This makes it more difficult for Heads of Departments to deny female staff equal opportunity. The culture change that it is helping implement also makes it easier for women (and hopefully men) to ask for flexibility in working practices. There is still a long way to go in changing the culture but we are moving in the right direction'*

## THE FUTURE

*'the most important thing is that we should continue to listen to the women of Queen's'*

The Forum recognises that although women in SET will benefit from all this, there are issues specific to SET for which the Forum is developing its action agenda to:

- persuade schoolgirls into engineering
- assure career development for post-docs
- deal with the problems of career breaks
- encourage young staff through mentoring
- monitor and review promotions mechanisms
- make heads of school and research groups aware of their responsibilities.

A valuable start has been the joint activities with the University of Ulster, which led to the setting up of a Local Academic Women's Network in November 2002.

The Forum plans to increase Queen's SET undergraduate female population, to retain and develop current staff and attract new staff. Initiatives approved by the Forum for which they are now seeking funding include:

- future expansion of the Queen's/Ulster Local Academic Women's Network to establish an All Ireland Network
- returners/movers fellowships to encourage women to return to an academic career after a career break and allow women to continue to pursue an academic career when they have to move when their partner moves, for three to five years on either a full-time or part-time basis
- travel allowance for conferences and childcare cover
- a research project to determine what would make an academic career in SET more attractive to women

- specific initiatives on undergraduate recruitment to increase potential pool of applicants for HE posts :
  - a survey of careers teachers to assess perceptions/knowledge of engineering in general and engineering as a suitable career for women, possibly developing an in-service awareness training module for careers teachers based on the results
  - developing teaching modules in gender awareness in teaching SET and awareness of the critical part played by teachers in influencing students perception of, and enthusiasm, for SET subjects. The modules to be delivered to PGCE students and to undergraduate teacher training students

In the longer term Queen's plan to work towards recreating in primary schools a sense of enjoyment and delight in science.

Queen's will use their Pearson prize money for work on science teacher training, an investigation of careers teachers' perceptions and a competition for departments to encourage women's progression and advancement in academic careers.

Queen's will use their Royal Society and Royal Academy of Engineering communication prize for an open competition for undergraduate and postgraduate engineering students to develop a presentation to promote engineering for women. The target audience for the presentation will be thirteen-year-olds girls (the age at which girls are most receptive to the ideas of careers in non-traditional areas).