

# RESNET 2002

## THE MATURING NETWORK

### - A POWERFUL TOOL

ResNet, a network for women research contract staff at the University of East Anglia (UEA), the John Innes Centre and the Institute of Food Research was awarded a special prize in the 2002 Athena Awards.

ResNet was founded by UEA in 2000 following a successful bid to the Athena Project. It was immediately extended to the John Innes Centre and the Institute of Food Research, affiliated institutes of the University located on the neighbouring Norwich Research Park.

As the Director of the John Innes Centre and a Pro Vice-Chancellor of UEA said in their endorsement of ResNet's submission for the Award *'From an impressive launch in early 2000, ResNet established itself quickly and firmly in both our institutions. Its members have arranged a varied annual programme which has attracted the attention of distinguished members of our research community. At the practical level, its members have been able to acquire the knowledge and skills in applying for grants and fellowships, as well as the confidence to apply for posts which benefit the wider scientific community. We therefore see its work as complementary to the work for equality of opportunity undertaken by the Athena Project. It also offers a unique contribution within the national programme for career development for contract researchers, who have been largely ignored in the past due to the temporary nature of their employment, but whose skills we know are vital to retain in the UK.'*

ResNet continues to provide well targeted practical activity and support for a group of staff at the first critical career stage of contract research where, to quote members *'things start to go wrong'* and *'CRS are an under-used and under-estimated pool of intellectual talent and transferable skills'*

The ResNet committee members are all volunteers from the three institutions. They organise the programme of monthly lunchtime meetings, which allow time for networking over lunch, and presentations/workshops by invited speakers or members. The programmes reflect the diversity of experience and aspirations of the committee (an international group). The topics all relate to scientific career development and provide information on opportunities, skills training, career profiles and most importantly role models – *'what we need and look for is normal women not superwomen as role models'*

## UEA AND NORWICH RESEARCH PARK

UEA admitted its first undergraduates in 1963 and now has 13,180 students and around 2,300 staff. The University's research activities are complemented by the Norwich Research Park, which was formed to promote and enhance collaborative links between UEA, the John Innes Centre and the Institute of Food Research. The Norwich Research Park constitutes one of Europe's largest centres for the study of plant, microbial and food sciences, health, agriculture and the environment.

The John Innes Centre was established in the 1960s and employs some 900 staff.

The Institute of Food Research has been at its present site since 1969 and employs 290 staff.

## Further Information

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## RESNET

ResNet is a network for women who work on short term contracts, mainly in the natural sciences, which aims to encourage mutual support and to empower its members by:

- offering opportunities to network and encouraging self-confidence as scientists
- continuing to ask questions and inform on the difficulties facing women in science
- promoting women's knowledge and skills as researchers
- seeking support from the top for increased transparency of policies and practices and improved opportunities for women in science
- being a source of knowledge and disseminating good practice in Norwich and elsewhere
- making sure more women can make informed and positive career choices
- highlighting issues / areas of concern

ResNet's membership has grown from 47 in early 2000 to 123 in March 2002. Attendance at events has not fallen below 20 and is sometimes as high as 50. Topics covered at its meetings have included:

- EU policies - making change happen and framework programmes
- role models
- contracts, pensions and promotions
- management skills
- lecturing at a new university and working for a medical charity

These events provide two-way communication. Through the networking and discussion the guest speakers, some of them highly influential (recent speakers include the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Executive of a Research Council), learn about the reality of the barriers women face in their career progression.

As a women-only network, ResNet gives to women what their research environment fails to give them (but does give men to a greater extent): support, encouragement, networking opportunities, and knowledge of how to progress in science and how to judge when/whether one is good enough and not to underestimate achievement.

ResNet is inclusive, every woman CRS is a potential member, whatever her career aspirations may be. However, the relatively high turnover of this staff group, the absence of formal links between the three institutions and information on joiners and leavers does not make for easy communication:

- at UEA new women research scientists receive a leaflet with their offers of appointment
- email flyers and the web are regularly used to publicise events/activities and to disseminate information
- individual members' personal recommendation and active encouragement to join and attend events are the most powerful persuaders

## RESNET'S SUCCESS

In terms of women's progression in SET careers (one of ResNet's original aims) it is too early to measure success but at UEA the last two years have seen no change in the proportion of women to men in research (40:60) and academic posts (10:90) . However ResNet is successful in terms of the personal development of its members, its wider impact and its own sustainability.

### The Development of ResNet's Members

ResNet's programme has allowed women to take positive stock of their skills and talents. Transferable skills, such as communication, organisational skills and team working, have been developed, for example by serving on the committee. Such experience has helped members to avoid the criticism of potential employers, who have found these skills lacking in postgraduate and postdoctoral job applicants (Roberts Report). Recent feedback from members provided in support of ResNet's submission for an Athena Award included:

- ResNet gives a greater sense of belonging in the scientific academic community *'where much makes one feel like an outsider'*
- inclusion of different nationalities provides knowledge of employment practice outside the UK
- committee membership provides information about how the University is organised and managed
- gained strength in knowing that one is not alone in facing the system
- learning how to negotiate increased training and feedback with manager
- information about the wider jobs market. *'the ability to make a positive and informed choice about careers, including the confidence to seek a new career outside science'*

- applying for and being appointed as EU research evaluators
- professional survival – *'learning about how research is funded and how to write a grant application.'*
- *'understanding of how men and women interact in the workplace'*
- *'single sex environment has fostered confidence' 'ResNet provided an arena in which I can ask questions without fear of prejudicing my continued employment'*

### ResNet's Wider Impact

Not only has ResNet provided support to individuals, it has also given women a voice which has been heard by Vice-Chancellors, Directors and the DTI. ResNet is referred to nationally by others as a model. UEA has recognised ResNet's contribution by funding it within its HR strategy work programme.

ResNet has received a number of invitations to participate in national activities connected with career development of contract researchers, and concerns about skills in SET. Its collective and individual voices are helping to ensure that gender issues are articulated for active consideration at all levels.

With members drawn from senior as well as junior researchers, ResNet has been able to highlight key problems linked to gender in the academic environment: the ethic that you have failed if you do not become a lecturer, that failure is attributed to a lack of scientific publications and the fact that success is not measured by skills learned, responsibility taken or teaching carried out.

## ResNet's Sustainability

The essential components of ResNet's sustainability are ownership by members, and

- sharing the load, which enables several committee members to gain organisational experience as well as easily maintaining a high quality programme
- email providing an easy and effective means of informing members about events
- a balanced programme to meet members' differing needs, offering information, role models and the opportunity to meet other women scientists outside the immediate locality
- administrative and clerical support is needed to disseminate information, administer events, and act as a focal point generally for two-way communication; additional support is required for developmental work
- the need to be prepared for unexpected outcomes and changes of direction as success snowballs: at the very least, a successful network rapidly becomes independent. 'Rather like Athena who was reputed to have entered the mythical pantheon of gods fully adult.'
- the network needing to reconnect to senior management regularly when appropriate opportunities permit, such as the publication of a survey
- the network taking stock from time to time, revisiting objectives and re-aligning if required

## THE FUTURE

ResNet's plans for the future all depend on the availability of support:

- add to the existing programme of events and invite a high profile speaker
- continue to support and encourage members to attend external conferences/seminars/ workshops at home and abroad
- create a Charter for women contract research staff (CRS) at UEA/IFR/JIC
- research into the culture of HE organisations in order to understand how ResNet can change
- an international conference, to focus on women's science
- a register of alumnae to facilitate continuing contact with past members

ResNet are planning to use their Pearson prize money towards:

- a quarterly newsletter to supplement the existing leaflet and programme of events
- production of a professional portfolio of Women Scientists at UEA and IFR/JIC to showcase and raise the profile of their research activities etc
- extending membership to postgraduates, to enable them to make informed choices about their careers at an early stage and to women faculty to learn from their academic success and to make the support structures of ResNet available to them and possibly to all women CRS regardless of discipline
- a mechanism to track the career progression of women scientists once they leave UEA/IFR/JIC
- creation of a ResNet Award for women at UEA/JIC/IFR who have excelled in their field