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**Women in UK science: the Athena Project<sup>2</sup>****Abstract**

*This paper gives an account of the UK Athena Project whose aim is the advancement of women in academic science. It briefly delineates the nature of the problem that Athena was set up to tackle, the policy developments that preceded the project and Athena's activities. It then considers what more could be done in the future and what is currently being achieved through the work of the Women and Science Section of the European Commission. A number of themes emerge including the need for long-term, sustained action for all women across their differences and commonalities and the need to ensure equality is embedded at all levels of organisational structures.*

**Introduction**

The Athena Project is a UK-wide initiative that was set up in 1999 with the aim of increasing the numbers of women academics in science, engineering and technology (SET). Athena's main focus is to improve women's career progression in the natural sciences and engineering, including the biosciences, chemistry, mathematics, information technology and systems science, physics and the broad range of engineering subjects, including civil, chemical, mechanical and electrical engineering. The project is a response to the stark under-representation of women in the academic sciences, particularly in professorial positions. An extreme example is civil engineering that in the UK in 1997/98 had 148 professors in total, none of whom were women. In 2000/2001 that figure rose to 185 professors, still all men<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The speech was first held at a project meeting in London from April 18<sup>th</sup> till April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and <http://www.set4women.gov.uk/statistics/index/html>

This paper gives an overview of the Athena Project, beginning with a brief consideration of the nature of the problem of women in academic science, the policy context that gave rise to the Project, its activities, their outcomes and work that is currently in progress. The paper concludes with a brief overview of activities being undertaken at European level to improve women's prospects in scientific careers.

### **The nature of the problem**

Though there has been a vast increase in the numbers of women graduates in recent decades, including those from ethnic minorities, the proportion of women in academia has not increased at the same rate, particularly in the more senior positions. Quantitative data show, for instance, that women occupy two per cent or less of professorships in many of the SET sub-disciplines in UK higher education institutions (Bebbington 2001a). Even in the sciences in which women are the majority both as undergraduates and postgraduates - most notably the biological sciences - their representation becomes progressively less the higher the position on the academic ladder.

While career progression tends to be the main concern of white women academics, access to higher education employment may be of even greater concern to ethnic minority and disabled women. Ethnic minority groups have been over-represented on higher education courses in relation to their proportion of the population for some time (Connor et al 1996), yet the problem for black women is that of access rather than culture or management, issues that particularly concern white women (Mirza 1995). Research and policy on women in SET rarely highlights how other aspects of women's identity such as their ethnicity and nationality may influence their participation in scientific employment. This is in spite of evidence of a relationship between gender, nationality and ethnicity and level of seniority and contractual status in academic employment (Carter, Fenton and Modood 1999). Concern is currently being expressed over the under-representation of African-Caribbean people in science (Baker 2002). This absence in research and policy should be borne in mind when considering the developments described here.

Data disaggregating academic staff numbers purely by gender indicate both vertical and horizontal segregation, with women as a whole over-represented in the lower grades and more heavily concentrated in certain disciplines, primarily the arts and humanities (Bebbington forthcoming). Women are most likely to be in language-based studies and least likely to be in engineering and technology. However, numerical feminisation, as has occurred in the biological sciences, is

not necessarily a guarantee that women will reach the top in these areas, a point noted by Glover (2002). Glover usefully argues that women's progress in scientific careers needs to be considered in terms of four distinct phases – qualifying, translating scientific qualifications into scientific employment, persistence and advancement. Women in the biological sciences may be doing well in the earlier phases, particularly in qualifying. However, in engineering women continue to gain far fewer qualifications than men, for example, in 1998/99 women domiciled in the UK gained only 18% of engineering and technology doctorates (Bebbington 2001a). An exploration of the reasons for these patterns is beyond the scope of this paper, however there is a broad consensus of opinion amongst researchers in the field that the problem lies not within women but in the culture of science itself which is hostile to their progress (Glover 2002).

### **The policy context**

The 1990's saw a number of significant policy developments in the UK that sought to address women's under-representation both in higher education and in scientific jobs across all sectors of the economy. Several reports drew attention to the low proportion of women on the staff of the universities, including 'Women at the Top' (Hansard Society Commission 1990) and 'Equal Opportunities in Employment in Universities' (Universities UK<sup>4</sup> 1991). These reports led to the establishment in 1994 of the Commission on University Career Opportunity (CUCO) whose aim was to promote employment diversity in the higher education sector. Among its functions were to improve the sector's awareness of diversity on the basis of ethnicity, disability, gender, sexuality and age. It published a range of guidelines including on setting equality targets, provision of childcare and recruitment, selection and promotion procedures (CUCO 1996a, 1996b and 1997).

The necessity for further action came from two inquiries, the Independent Review of Higher Education Pay and Conditions (1999) - commonly referred to as the Bett Report - and the National Inquiry into Higher Education (1997). Both drew attention to continuing gender inequalities in the sector and recommended a range of actions including improving career structures and pay. The recognition that much was still to be done led to the setting up of the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) initially funded by the Higher Education Funding

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<sup>4</sup> Formerly the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP).

Councils from 2001 to 2006. The ECU is based in London and its work is guided by the Joint Equality Steering Group<sup>5</sup>.

In parallel, the 1990's saw increasing attention paid to women's poor representation in science. Significantly the 1993 Government White Paper 'Realising Our Potential' (HMSO 1993) highlighted the importance of science, engineering and technology for the UK's economic growth and it stated that:

....women are the UK's single, most undervalued, and consequently underused human resource (p.57).

A number of initiatives followed that focused specifically on women in SET, beginning with the Rising Tide Committee that reported its recommendations in 1994 (HMSO 1994). A major result of the inquiry was the creation of an office dedicated to the promotion of women in science from school to university and across all economic sectors. This is continuing in its work as the Promoting SET for Women Unit in the Office of Science and Technology, Department of Trade and Industry<sup>6</sup>. Its activities include acting as a focal point in encouraging and supporting organisations involved in gender-related issues in SET and producing materials for schools, employers and women scientists. Within higher education there was increasing recognition that female representation in academic science was particularly poor and that this was an area that needed targeted help. Five years on from 'Realising Our Potential' the position was little improved in quantitative terms, with the recruitment of women into lecturer grades hardly increasing and few gaining professorships – 97 out of total of 3,092 in physical science and engineering departments in 1998. It was against this background that the Athena Project was established<sup>7</sup>. The project gained support from the Government and from the Office of Science and Technology and was launched in 1999.

Athena receives core funding from the higher education funding councils of England, Scotland and Wales and the Northern Ireland Department for Employment and the Office of Science and Technology, Department of Trade and Industry. The project is now incorporated into the ECU, and though funded until 2003, its activities may continue in some form within the broader programme of the ECU. The project is currently run by two part-time members

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<sup>5</sup> Further information on this initiative is available from [info@ecu.ac.uk](mailto:info@ecu.ac.uk)

<sup>6</sup> Further information available at <http://www.set4women.gov.uk>

<sup>7</sup> For further information and copies of the reports mentioned in this paper contact [athena@ecu.ac.uk](mailto:athena@ecu.ac.uk)

of staff<sup>8</sup> and is guided by the Athena Advisory Committee made up of senior scientists and academics. Its stated aims are to:

- draw on existing good human resource practice within and outside higher education
- encourage and support the development of good practice
- disseminate learning and good practice to higher education institutions
- contribute to and respond to external initiatives on women in SET

A number of key issues were identified in the initial stages of the project through discussion with heads of institutions, senior managers and women working in SET. These provided the focus of Athena's Development Programme and many of its other activities as follows:

- institutional culture, values, attitudes and behaviour
- organisational policies, practices, systems and arrangements
- personal factors which shape or constrain career choices and outcomes

### **Athena's activities**

Athena's main activities include the awarding of eleven development grants to higher education institutions, developing a research strategy to collate and disseminate research findings and good practice through a programme of regional and national events and to provide consultancy to a wide range of research projects and inquiries. The team has given presentations and papers to conferences, meetings and workshops and set up regional networks of academic women. Athena is currently running an Awards Scheme.

#### *Athena Development Grants*

Eleven projects were carried out with small grants from Athena, six in 1999 and five in 2000. Institutions were required to bid for grants and carried out the work in their own university or college. The projects have all been completed and written up. The first six are described here. Two good practice guides based on

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<sup>8</sup> Caroline Fox, Programme Manager and Fiona MacLean, Administrator

the projects have been published. The six projects completed with the first tranche of development grants were:

- RESNET 2000 - *University of East Anglia (UEA)*
- ALiS - associate lecturers in science – *Open University (OU)*
- A pilot mentoring scheme for women in science, engineering and technology - *Bolton Institute*
- Might mentoring help? - *Imperial College*
- Skill acquisition and mentoring during early career stages – *Nottingham and Loughborough Universities*
- A mentoring scheme to improve the career progression for women in SET – *WiTEC<sup>9</sup> and Sheffield Hallam University*

The University of East Anglia developed a support network for contract researchers – RESNET. Alongside this was a programme of activities and events with visiting speakers, workshops on professional development and so on. A web page and email line were set up to facilitate communication and exchange of ideas. A survey of contract researchers was undertaken to provide supporting data. Funded by the Universities and Colleges Staff Development Agency (UCosDA), the survey looked at the career aspirations of contract researchers and barriers/facilitators to progress. Recommendations included the need for staff development through such systems as appraisal and mentoring, keeping data to monitor progress and the need to influence those leading research projects on their responsibilities to staff.

The Open University (OU) carried out a survey to find out why it is more successful than other institutions in recruiting women to science and technology posts. The OU employs a higher percentage of women at associate lecturer level (a post that has considerable flexibility) and full-time lecturers. A major conclusion is that the OU offers more flexible working arrangements than other universities and colleges. The project report considers ways in which flexible working practices may be transferred to other situations and how strategies may be introduced for women returning to work.

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<sup>9</sup> Women in Science, Engineering and Technology - <http://www.shu.ac.uk/witec/>

Four institutions set up mentoring schemes. Bolton Institute initiated a scheme whose aims included raising the profile of women students and staff, improving their career progression, enhancing mentees' development, increasing self-confidence, reducing isolation, encouraging women to apply for managerial positions and increasing the numbers of women postgraduates in SET. Mentors from both industry and academia took part. A major benefit of the programme was a reduction in isolation felt by the women and due to the project's success, recommendations were made for future programmes. A pilot mentoring scheme was undertaken by Imperial College, London that led to annual networking events, including an email support network and workshops on professional development. Like Bolton, Imperial found the scheme to be highly beneficial, providing a strong support mechanism for staff as well as improving awareness within the institution of women in SET. It was felt that any future schemes should provide support for mentors and give careful consideration to the pairing of mentors/mentored.

The mentoring scheme established by the Universities of Nottingham and Loughborough resulted from concern that women were leaving SET at postdoctoral level. The scheme was run in parallel with a professional development programme. The scheme developed by WiTEC and Sheffield Hallam included the development of a mentors' training programme. The project led to the incorporation of the mentoring training course onto the staff development programme and recognition from the university there was need to support mentoring from within institutional structures.

Even though mentoring is increasingly being used as a strategy to assist disadvantaged groups including women and ethnic minorities in overcoming barriers to such areas as learning and career progression, there is a lack of research that critically analyses mentoring practice from a socially informed perspective (Eliasson et al 2000, Odih 2002). Nevertheless, participants in the Athena-sponsored projects reported personal benefits and awareness was raised within the institutions of how mentoring may be of help. Several Athena projects highlighted the need to continue the programme over a substantial period of time. It was recognised that more data are needed on the long-term effects of mentoring on women's career progression.

### *Research strategy*

A major task of Athena's research strategy was to pool existing research and disseminate these findings to as wide an audience as possible. A number of activities were undertaken to achieve this including the publication of a 44-page

literature review (Bebbington 2001a). The review's aims were to give an overview of recent research on women's academic careers across the disciplines, to collate research on women scientists' careers in higher education, to identify areas where research is lacking or insufficient and to make recommendations as to where future research efforts should be directed. The review considers the main policy initiatives mounted in this area and to what extent their activity has been oriented towards recommendations, implementation and evaluation. Among the paper's conclusions are that longitudinal data are unavailable in the UK that track women scientists' careers over time. In-depth qualitative work on how women scientists experience the academic labour market may offer more insight into the barriers to career progression. Aside from autobiographical accounts, there is a dearth of research on how different groups of women, including those with disabilities or from ethnic minorities, experience the academic labour market, least of all within the scientific disciplines.

Further dissemination of research findings was undertaken by organising and attending conferences and meetings. With sponsorship from the Royal Institution of Great Britain and L'Oreal UK<sup>10</sup>, Athena held a research conference that brought together the latest studies that could throw light on women's continuing under-representation in science, including two major projects: 'Women's Scientific Lives' (Blackwell 2002) and 'Who Applies for Research Funding?' (Blake and La Valle 2000, Blake 2002). Blackwell's longitudinal study using 1971 and 1991 UK census data finds that women and men use scientific qualifications in different ways when they enter the labour market, with men more likely to enter SET employment than women. There are significant differences in family formation patterns between women employed in SET and those in non-SET occupations with women in SET more likely to delay child-bearing. Blake and La Valle's research looking at gender differences in grant application behaviour shows that while women are as successful in gaining research grants when they do apply, women make fewer applications in the first place.

Papers and presentations include a paper given at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Gender and Education Conference (Bebbington 2001b) and a presentation/seminar delivered with Dr Lisa Crossman, University of East Anglia on equal opportunities in research careers at the Universities UK Conference, 'Supporting and Developing Research Careers' held in March 2002. A paper will be given with Dr Jan Peters, formerly of the Promoting SET for Women Unit at the forthcoming EASST 2002 conference 'Responsibility under Uncertainty' in

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<sup>10</sup> Athena gratefully acknowledges both the Royal Institution and L'Oreal UK for their support of this event.

August 2002. Athena was represented on the advisory panel of the ‘Women’s Scientific Lives’ project and gave evidence, with the Equality Challenge Unit, to the Gareth Roberts’ Review on the Supply of Scientists and Engineers<sup>11</sup>.

### *Local Academic Women’s Networks (LAWNS)*

Athena awarded five small grants from its 2000 Development Programme to existing groups of women in SET and allied disciplines who were committed to the aims of the the project. They are based at the University of East Anglia, Leeds, Loughborough, Plymouth and St Andrews. The emphasis is on seeking support and commitment from senior managers within the institutions, partners from other universities, research institutions and local industry. The aims of the LAWNS include:

- Raising the profile of women locally
- Promoting the work of less experienced researchers
- Improving institutional support for research staff
- Improving cross-disciplinary collaboration for research
- Improving associations between academia and industry
- Encouraging the appointment of women onto university committees
- Promoting regional links
- Sharing information, ideas and good practice

The St Andrew’s LAWN sought additionally to promote small changes in the culture within male-dominated science faculties. The network supported a high profile lecture series that previously included few women by ensuring that more women were represented in the seminars. As well as providing a platform for women scientists, the series provided networking opportunities and a commitment from most seminar organisers to include women in future programmes.

### *Awards Scheme*

The Awards Scheme has been set up to recognise and publicise good practice in higher education that enhances the careers of women in SET. Submissions are invited from SET departments and research groups, staff development and equal opportunities personnel and women’s networks. Individual institutions or groups

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/documents/enterprise\\_and\\_productivity/research\\_and\\_enterprise/ent\\_res\\_roberts.cfm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/documents/enterprise_and_productivity/research_and_enterprise/ent_res_roberts.cfm)

of institutions are able to make submissions. Work submitted is required to demonstrate how it has contributed to Athena's aims including increasing the numbers of women at all levels of SET departments, improving their career development, raising their profile and/or how it has increased understanding of the barriers encountered.

## **The future**

Many benefits have been gained from the activities of Athena, including improved opportunities for networking and the sharing of experiences amongst scientists through various events hosted by Athena, including talks given by eminent women in science, conferences and workshops. Other developments have been the setting up of mentoring schemes and general awareness raising. However, the effects of the project in the long-term are difficult to ascertain, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and it is clear that there is still a long way to go as has been pointed out earlier. The Athena Project has a limited lifespan and limited resources, with only two part-time staff and funding that runs out in March 2003. It cannot therefore provide the sustained effort that is needed.

In the future, greater efforts could be made to contextualise specific aspects of women's academic careers in the sciences, taking into account the broader picture of gender and academic employment and gender divisions within the labour market in order to understand more clearly what is and what is not unique to the scientific labour market. Also interesting to compare with academia would be women's experiences in private sector science, an aspect of women's employment in science now receiving attention from the Women and Science Unit at the European Commission<sup>12</sup>. Within the sciences, a fuller understanding is needed as to why patterns of career progression are so variable between the disciplines as described in an earlier part of this paper.

There is a need to consider not only women's numerical representation but the quality of their experiences, their working conditions and so on. Morley (2002) argues that even if numbers change through increased access, the knowledge of groups such as women and working class people is not necessarily given epistemic privilege within the academy, resulting in a split between cultural and academic life. She also makes the point that there is no guarantee that getting more women into senior positions will change the situation for other women in

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<sup>12</sup> See the initiative 'Women in Industrial Research'.  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/science-society/women/wir/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/science-society/women/wir/index_en.html)

their organisations, as not all women are gender aware. A further reason to look beyond statistics is that an increase in the proportion of women may accompany a concomitant worsening of working conditions. Simienska (2000), for example, shows that during Poland's transition from socialism to capitalism, working conditions in the universities have got worse, but at the same time the proportion of women has increased. Though there appears to have been a 'brain drain' from the academic sector, women have tended to remain there.

Future efforts need to integrate equalities more effectively as regards women in academic science. As this paper has already pointed out, people from some ethnic minorities are under-represented in science, yet there are currently no published data that look at the intersection between gender and ethnicity in relation to the scientific disciplines. In this respect, recent policy initiatives to integrate equal opportunities are to be welcomed, one proposal being the UK government's idea to create a single equalities commission that will cover all areas currently dealt with by the Disability Rights Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission. The tendency to view women as a single, unified group and the need to challenge this has been underlined by Nkweto Simmonds (1992). She emphasises the need for a perspective that acknowledges both commonalities and differences across race, gender, nationality, disability and so on.

A further approach now being discussed in research and policy involves 'mainstreaming' equality. Mainstreaming, according to Rees (1998) involves the transformation of organisations at all levels and is a long-term strategy:

The task in transforming, then, is to win hearts and minds, to recognise the complexities of EO [Equal Opportunities] and to build organisations, policies and projects informed by a desire to accommodate and benefit from the strengths of diversity (pp. 46-47, Rees 1998)

Husu (2000) emphasises the need for infrastructures and resources that will enable mainstreaming to take place. She argues that in order for mainstreaming policies to be successful, infrastructures, units or networks are necessary to 'collect, accumulate and effectively distribute gender equality expertise within the organisation' (p,183). Furthermore, regular assessment is required of the successes and failures of mainstreaming actions and policies.

## Europe activity

A major initiative at European level was the setting up in 1999 of the Women and Science Section within the Directorate General of Research. In 2001 this was incorporated into the new Science and Society Directorate. A major aim of this unit is to promote the fuller participation of women in research. It has approached this on a number of fronts by organising several major, international conferences on women in science (European Commission 2000, European Commission forthcoming), publishing the influential ETAN report (European Commission 2000), setting up the Helsinki Group of civil servants from across the European Union, funding several studies including a project that mapped available statistics on women and science (Glover and Bebbington 2000), leading the drive both towards collating and disseminating better data on women in science and undertaking the Women in Industrial Research project.

The ETAN report draws together a range of initiatives from European countries that have sought to improve women's prospects in science at all stages – from encouraging more girls to take up science, to encouraging women who have left science to return. The report notes, however, that these initiatives are not in themselves adequate to make significant change. Long-term strategies as well as adequate investment are required. Among its specific recommendations are to:

- Improve legislation
- Improve statistical data
- Mainstream equality in the 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme
- Take positive action initiatives
- Introduce initiatives at Member State level, including development of best practice in recruitment

The Helsinki Group of national civil servants was set up following a meeting in Helsinki in 1999. This was established as a policy forum that would increase dialogue amongst the Member States. This group has now produced reports on the situation of women scientists in each Member State and from the fifteen other countries associated with the Fifth Framework Programme<sup>13</sup>. A significant outcome of the Section's research and development in the area of indicators has been the publication on the web of readily downloadable statistics and indicators on women and science<sup>14</sup>.

A recent project of the Women and Science Section is the formation of an expert group to look at women in industrial research where it appears there is even

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<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.cordis.lu/improving/women/reports.htm>

<sup>14</sup> See: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/science-society/women/wssi/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/science-society/women/wssi/index_en.html)

greater under-representation of women than in the public sector<sup>15</sup>. The project's aim is to give guidance at Commission and Member State level as to how change in this area can be brought about, for example, through developing new measures.

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<sup>15</sup> See: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/science-society/women/wir/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/science-society/women/wir/index_en.html)

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