

Stopping the brain drain of women scientists

February 6 2014, by Clem Herman



Jobs for the girls. Credit: Rhoda Baer, via Wikimedia Commons

You can be forgiven for assuming that gender is not an issue any more in higher education. There are [more young women entering universities](#) than ever before and they are graduating each year in their hundreds of thousands. But for those that go on to work as academics in science, technology, engineering or maths (STEM), it is still very much a man's world.

The [House of Commons Science and Technology Committee](#) has just published a report on Women in Scientific Careers, which says:

It is astonishing that despite clear imperatives and multiple initiatives to improve diversity in STEM, women still remain under-represented at senior levels across every discipline.

But while I agree with much of what the report goes on to say, I disagree on this first point. It is not astonishing at all. Academic institutions are some of the oldest workplaces in our society – some dating back to the Middle Ages. The working norms and career ladders of academia evolved when there were few women around, and when men were assumed to have a stay-at-home wife to take care of the family.

While some things have clearly changed, there is still an assumption that to be successful and climb the career ladder, the ideal academic will be full time, have no career breaks and be able to move institution or country as research opportunities arise. In fact, what is more astonishing is how well many women have done despite the constraints of a typical university career and the entrenched attitudes that have worked to men's advantage.

Put off by short-term contracts

The select committee set out to discover what universities and government could do to change this situation. Although there are some similarities with other sectors and with employment in STEM industries, the committee was particularly concerned about academic careers, mainly because this is where scientists and other STEM professionals are trained. It is also where women are most likely to drop out.

One of the main issues for women starting out in academic careers is the initial insecurity of employment, often requiring many years of short-

term contracts and moving between institutions before achieving a permanent post.

For women, this often coincides with the time of their lives at which they want to have children, in their late twenties and early thirties, so it is often the point at which they opt out. The report recommends that research funders should increase the number of longer term post doctorate positions. This would help all researchers – both men and women – in establishing their careers and reputations without having to constantly be on the move.

My research with women returning from career breaks, both to academia and to other STEM careers, has revealed the difficulties that these women encounter in trying to re-establish themselves.

In fact, at the Open University between 2005 and 2011 more than 1,000 women took part in our [Return to SET programme](#). This was one of the achievements of the government funded [UK Resource Centre for Women in SET](#) (UKRC) of which the Open University was a core partner.

I commend the select committee for illustrating the impact of the 2010 budget cuts which meant much of this work has been stopped. What the UKRC recognised was that it was no good trying to patch up the problem in one organisation or for one group of women. Rather, changes are needed on many fronts at the same time in order to bring about real cultural transformation.

Stamp out bias for next generation

One of the interesting ideas the MPs highlight is unconscious bias. Scientists may think they are objective because of the kind of work they do, but of course they can be just as influenced by unconscious gender

stereotypes as the rest of the population.

The report recommends institutions and grant makers take equality and diversity training to help reveal hidden attitudes and processes that might be affecting how women are treated in their organisations. And it goes one step further, by suggesting this kind of training and awareness-raising should also be provided to all STEM undergraduate and postgraduate students, some of whom will of course become the next generation of scientists and engineers themselves.

This report is important in setting out specific recommendations which should make a difference in helping more women reach senior positions. But in my view it shouldn't just be about those high achieving women at the top. Yes, it's symbolic to have women in senior positions, but the individuals this would directly affect would be few in number.

We need greater opportunities for [women](#) to have successful sustainable careers at all levels, part time and full time, as teachers as well as internationally famous researchers, and as lab technicians as well as professors.

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