

# Power shift needed to improve gender balance in energy research, report says

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Women still face significant barriers in forging successful and influential careers in UK energy research, a new high-level report has revealed.

A team of experts from the University of Exeter's Energy Policy Group has analysed gender balance within the crucial field of energy research and spoken to female researchers about their experiences of academic life. The study, launched today (14th June 2019), sets out how research funders and universities can ensure female talent and expertise is mobilised in transforming our [energy systems](#).

The report is particularly timely as the UK parliament declares a climate emergency and the government commits to legislate for a 2050 net-zero greenhouse gas emissions target. It is clear that energy research needs to harness 100 percent of available talent in order to meet the challenge of rapidly decarbonising energy systems.

The study revealed that women are still significantly under-represented in energy research and application rates from women are low. It also found that grants applied for and awarded to women tend to be of smaller value, when they do apply female academics are equally and sometimes more likely to be funded than male academics.

The report also highlighted the 'significant drop-off' between the number of female Ph.D. students and funded researchers—meaning the sector loses a substantial pool of potential talent at an early stage.

The research presents four key ways in which funders and universities can work together to improve gender balance: look at the data, fund more women, stimulate career progression for female energy academics, and build on what's already working.

Jess Britton, a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Exeter and co-author of the report said: "Progress on gender balance in research has been too slow for too long, but we think now is the time to bring together action across funders and universities to ensure that female talent is capitalised on. Taking action across the funding, institutional and systemic issues we identify could drive a real shift in inclusion in the sector".

The new report, commissioned by the UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC) and funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) saw the researchers speak to 59 female academics conducting energy research and from various disciplines, institutions and career stages. They also analysed available data on gender and energy research funding.

Crucially, interviews with the researchers unearthed an array of issues that were felt to be holding women back from career progression—including the detrimental impact of part-time work or maternity leave, and inherent institutional and funding bias towards established, male academics.

While the report recognised that since 2017 there has been some progress in the gender balance of Peer Review Panel Members and small increases in awards granted to female researchers, progress has remained slow.

The study suggests that any progress should be accompanied by systemic change within the institutional structures and cultural environment of

institutions involved with energy research.

Jim Watson, director of UKERC added: "This report shows that there is an urgent need to address the poor gender balance within the UK energy research community—particularly with respect to leadership of grants and career progression.

"It not only reveals the extent of the problem with new evidence, but makes a series of practical recommendations should be required reading for funders and universities alike."

The research identified four key ways in which UKRI, other funders and universities can work to improve gender balance. They are:

- Look at the data—There remain significant difficulties in accessing meaningful data on gender balance in energy research. Data should be published, used to set targets, monitor progress and provide annual updates. The report also suggested using quantitative and qualitative data to identify key intervention points, speaking to more female energy academics to identify biases and barriers, and continuing to improve gender balance in funding review processes.
- Fund more women—the report identified that funding structures can be a barrier, and that both part-time working and career breaks are perceived to slow progress. It suggests that the assessment of part-time working and maternity leave needs to be standardised across funder eligibility criteria and in the review process. It also identified that a lack of diversity of funding types impacts on women, and suggested trialling innovative approaches to allocating funding and supporting early career researchers.
- Stimulate career progression for female energy academics—The report highlighted the need to acknowledge and take action on the individualistic, long hours culture of academia and also overhaul

existing institutional structures and cultures. Early career stages are often characterised by precarious fixed-term contracts and over reliance on quantitative measures of progress. It also recommended building suitable training, mentoring and support networks to help more women progress and ensure the visibility of female researchers.

- Build on what is working—The study recommended identifying key points of engagement to build [gender balance](#): combine specific targeted actions, such as UKRI and university frameworks and targeted funding initiatives, with long-term action on structural issues that promote cultural change in our institutions. It also identified the need to ensure equality of voice—so that female academic voices are heard.

Alison Wall, deputy director for equality, diversity and inclusion at EPSRC said: "We welcome this report, its findings and recommendations. Many of the issues raised are ones we recognise more widely in our research community.

"Enhancing diversity and inclusion is one of the priorities in our new Delivery Plan. For example, we plan to make further progress on embedding EDI into the grant application process, developing our peer review processes, provision of further data and increased flexibility in our funding."

Abbie Sampson, director of external affairs at Energy UK said: "This report shines a light on the significant barriers for women within UK energy research and importantly, provides advice on the steps that can be taken to address this issue and ensure that all talent can be maximised. The energy sector is undergoing a rapid transition and with that comes an opportunity to create a more diverse and inclusive industry, to better reflect the customers and communities we serve and give more people the opportunity to work in an exciting industry at the forefront of

innovation and technological development.

"Energy UK is committed to making [energy](#) a more equal, diverse and inclusive industry, and we have been leading efforts through our 'Equality and Diversity Forum' which brings together organisations , from across the industry and beyond, to share best practice, foster collaboration and drive positive change."

**More information:** A copy of the report and the full list of recommendations can be found here: [geography.exeter.ac.uk/media/ugd/2019/06/Power\\_Shift.pdf](https://geography.exeter.ac.uk/media/ugd/2019/06/Power_Shift.pdf)

Provided by University of Exeter

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