

# Women in Academia

## Summary of main discussion points

### Presentation by Catherine Lyall

The 5 key 'lessons' of academia:

1. **RESILIENCE** - academic life is full of rejection and disappointments. Articles refused, grants unfunded, colleagues who are either too self-absorbed to be supportive or who actively undermine you. You need to find a way of developing resilience. You need to develop the skin of a rhinoceros
2. **BOLDNESS** It is not enough to be doing good research on your own. You need to get out there and network. You need to be prepared to stick your head over the parapet and get out of your comfort zone. For me, that was getting out of my subject group and doing school and college jobs
3. **TRAVEL** If I have a regret about my academic career it is that I haven't lived and worked abroad. Travel broadens the mind, it also bulks out the CV. Universities, or at least this institution, don't value home grown talent as much as it does people with overseas experience. So, if you can, spend some time abroad, even if it is just short visiting fellowships.
4. **BALANCE** You hear a lot about work-life balance at these types of events. I have a slightly different take on this and it is learning to say "NO". This is a job essentially without boundaries – you can always do more. There have been times in my career when I have found myself running between meetings and working evenings and weekends but by no means all the time. I did my PhD part-time in four years, I got my professorship eight years after completing my PhD while working part-time and I did that by being strategic and learning when to say "NO" to things. So, if you have already edited a special issue or an edited collection, is there really any advantage to doing another one or could you be doing something else with your time?
5. **PERSPECTIVE** We don't have a strong line management culture within academia and we still don't have anything approaching proper performance appraisal so this is a job where you can often feel underappreciated and uncertain about whether you are doing a good enough job. Treasure those moments when others do show their appreciation of your work and find ways that work for you in order to keep a sense of perspective on the job.

## Presentation by Mary Holmes

- You are doing well, don't apologise. We all have imposter syndrome but trust your colleagues and the mounting evidence of your success.
- Remember there is no success without failure.
- Accept kindness and be kind. That is how I got here.
- Find allies and collaborators you like. You can always develop common intellectual interests afterwards.
- Be persistent. I applied for a job at Edinburgh 3 times before I got one
- Pick your role models. There are different ways to be an academic. There may be costs and benefits to each, but consider what kind you might want to be.
- You cannot do everything. Learn to say no. Any advice gratefully accepted on how to do this!
- Pick your battles. When unsure about what to pick, ask advice from people you respect. Also don't underestimate solidarity, canvass others' opinions about whether a collective response might be possible.
- Remember why you got into academia. Usually because of passion or enjoyment of aspects of the job. Cling to and make the most of these. Schedule them in, as all the boring stuff gets scheduled in. Enjoyment is not a luxury, so often over a lovely lunch or pleasant coffee with like-minded academics comes great research!

## Presentation by Meryl Kenny

### 1. Resilience in the face of an increasingly competitive job market.

- Took me 4 years post-PhD to get my first permanent lectureship – time before that spent in series of post-docs, part-time admin posts, and teaching fellowships. This is increasingly a 'typical' career path (very rare to get lectureships straight out of PhD).
- Think about end goal (permanent lectureship?) and prioritise elements of CV building that will get you there (e.g. Do you need to teach the same course for the 4th time?) – for me, publications mattered most. Think also about what point at the REF cycle you're in – that will shape how many jobs are on the market, but also what they expect from you in interviews.
- Things that matter (not advice – just observation): geographical flexibility (links here, of course, to caring responsibilities), 'moveable' partners, etc.

### 2. Importance of mentorship/role-models/networks

- PhD supervisors, research networks, professional association specialist groups and sections, wider scholarly community (but not a replication of old boys networks!). For me were important in lots of ways – collaborative publications, advice on CVs/job applications ('evidencing' your achievements), negotiating pay at new institutions, etc.
- Male mentors also important! Though sometimes overly of the 'publish or perish' variety (but still useful on 'how to say no').

- Importance of ‘paying it forward’/passing it on once you’re in the position too (with your own grad students, colleagues, etc)

### 3. What I wish I’d known – how to pick battles, particularly in cases of indirect/direct sexism

- Often easier to fight collectively rather than individually (e.g. Through women’s forums in universities/departments, or women’s sections of professional associations).
- Difficult to know how to deal with incidences of harassment and sexism as a junior academic with little capital, particularly in spaces without much support.

#### Presentation by Janet Carsten

- Discussed the feeling of ‘imposter syndrome’ at all levels of academia and the high standards set by individuals of themselves.

#### Presentation by Christina Boswell

- Make best use of the opportunities for flexibility in academia – flexible hours, adjusting part-time status, etc.
- But – have an awareness of how family life can limit mobility. So bear this in mind when planning family. You won’t have as much chance to travel for networking, collaboration, etc.
- My experience is that securing external grant funding is a good way of leveraging more autonomy in one’s academic role – gives one greater time for research, and for selecting the ‘package’ of tasks and roles one is allocated
- Don’t be too perfectionist, particularly during more challenging phases (e.g. maternity leave, with young family). Cut yourself some slack.
- Try to be pro-active in choosing which leadership roles you want. Don’t wait to be offered ones you don’t want – put yourself forward, and ask for advice on steps you need to take to be in a position to take on the more interesting/challenging roles (if that’s what you are aiming for)
- Try not to stretch yourself too thin. Best to do, say, 3 different things well at one phase of your working life, rather than everything at the same time (teaching, research, leadership, impact, etc.)

#### Presentation by Morag Trainor

##### *Be bold:*

- Be very bold and assertive in writing a CV. In my previous posts I was responsible for recruiting graduate researchers (who sometimes had a PhD and usually had an MSc at least). I was struck by how bold, confident and assertive men’s CVs were compared to women’s. In interview it would transpire that they did not have more experience or skills than women but they wrote about themselves very differently.

- Be bold in contacting other senior colleagues and high ranking academics to discuss their work. Ask if they are going to the same conference as you and try to arrange a coffee and a chat. People love to talk about their work.
- Be bold in applying for jobs, especially THAT job. You might never feel that you stand a chance - keep applying and don't be put off by rejection.
- Try to say 'yes' for good citizenship but not to your detriment. Be bold enough to say 'no' when necessary.

*Having previous experience:*

- Bad news: taking on an academic job at a lower grade than in previous sectors is difficult, especially when the previous experience has direct relevance and benefit to the new role. I don't think many men would voluntarily take a job with reduced status and pay.
- Even the way you are asked to lay out an academic CV for the promotions process assumes a linear path through academia post-graduation.
- Good news: coming at academia later with related experience may not initially be recognised; however, it begins to be when people see you as a safe pair of hands (which is due to your previous experience). I think this is predominantly a female phenomenon.

*These Things I know:*

- I find academia the most family friendly of all my jobs so far. The difficulty is in balancing work and parenting full stop. Academic work balances with parenting better than many other sectors.
- Perspective and priorities: many of the difficulties with balancing work and family in academia comes from our own internal drives. We are often hardworking, competitive perfectionists and feel we have to write more papers, grant applications, books and take on more leadership roles in order to advance. It is important to be kind to yourself, take time off, use your holidays and weekends for your family.
- Be strategic: this relates to the point above. Be strategic in everything you do for your CV:
  - Do strategic teaching – aim to reach a range of levels and perhaps do both substantive and methodological teaching.
  - Do strategic networking – contact the people whose work you admire and chat to them.
  - Apply for jobs strategically – don't exhaust yourself on lots of tiny bits of work. Think big.
  - Negotiate strategically.

## Points from General Discussion

- Confusion expressed by PhD students of the most appropriate route to report concerning behaviour and/or difficulties with male supervisors.
- How to record and highlight “non-actionable” everyday sexism.
- PhD students expressed a lack of awareness of the professional development advice and training that is available (including the role of supervisor in preparing students for professional life).
- Request for a document outlining maternity leave allowances from funders for PhD students and those on temporary research grants.