



re:search

Women in Research

The Athena Project, based at the Royal Society, was set up to facilitate the advancement of women in science, engineering and technology (SET) in higher education, as well as to increase the number of women recruited to the top posts. In spring 2003 Athena undertook the online ASSET survey, which attracted responses from 2,172 male and female academic staff in SET at lecturer level or above, in 23 UK universities. ASSET was designed to raise awareness about the issue of women's career progression in SET.

Some key findings were as follows:

- Men were far more likely to be encouraged to apply for senior positions and were better positioned for promotion.
- Comments from women who had taken a career break showed that poor people management resulted in such things as an individual's teaching being saved up until she returned. Having time for research was considered critical to getting an academic career back, so departmental support and flexibility made all the difference.
- When it came to women at the top, 45% felt they were disadvantaged on salary and 43% disadvantaged on promotion. Of the 471 women professors who responded, the survey suggests that they may not be well positioned to act as positive role models, or to influence the way that their departments were run. Women professors also felt significantly less supported by senior colleagues and less socially integrated within their department.

The higher level of disenchantment in women – particularly those in the most senior positions – compared with male colleagues is often explained away as a reflection of previous poor practice 'which will be a thing of the past when this cohort retires'. The ASSET survey, however, suggests this may not be the case, and that many barriers to women's advancement are still in place.

Since publication of the survey, Bristol University has already implemented measures to address some of the key issues. It aims to repeat the survey next year to monitor the impact of the actions taken.

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Deputy Personnel Director

The ASSET online survey used BOS (Bristol Online Surveys), a web-based tool developed at Bristol University that allows users to create, deploy and analyse surveys via the internet.

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re:search No 7
July 2004
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