Putting equality on the agenda

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At a recent Policy Lunchbox event, Jane Butcher the Deputy Director of the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (UKRC SET) gave a presentation on ‘Women in science: a policy perspective’. The following is a report from this meeting.

The policy environment in which the issues facing women in science are found is seen to be highly complex. For example, stereotyping and unconscious bias are brought about and reinforced by the employment life cycle – this includes inputs from society, education and employment policies and environments and life styles. Given this complexity, it is important to UKRC SET that encouragement of women in science is not done solely from an early careers perspective, but looks towards the long-term sustainability of increased numbers of women in SET.

This includes the retention of those already employed in the sector.

The UKRC has six messages to the Government that are crucial in building on the current momentum for change:

- Leadership and top level support for change
- Attracting and retaining women and girls to study STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics)
- Making the most of the talents of UK’s trained and qualified people to build the workforce.
- Make SET learning and employment free from gender stereotyping
- Take measures to make equality in SET happen
- Support and fund the UKRC in its work, and strengthen its role in leading, providing services, influencing and innovating.

These six messages are included in the document the UKRC SET published in advance of the General Election called The business of equality.

The document makes the economic case (“The loss to the UK economy by qualified women scientist, technologists and engineers working below their level of qualification, unemployed or inactive is estimated to be £2bn.”) in addition to other observations including a predominately male aging workforce and increasing amounts of evidence showing that women on boards and in teams improve profitability and performance.

Highlighting the economic case for equality at a time of economic stringency is both sensible and unsurprising.

In the document, UKRC SET explicitly asks the next Government to leverage improvement across government, in the professions and in the private sector, by implementing and monitoring targets for female and male participation in SET across all relevant government programmes affecting science, the workforce and those seeking employment and education, with a goal of achieving:

- 30% participation in the professional and associate professional SET workforce by 2020
- 10% in the vocational workforce by 2020
- 50% participation of women on SET public bodies (although, confusingly, with a goal of 40% by 2020)

The advantages of targets for the numbers of women in SET over quotas were considered by the UKRC SET: although rigid quotas have been seen to work in Norway, for the moment they are seen to be unpalatable and supported targets may be more pragmatic.

The role that professional bodies and learned societies might play in supporting the adult careers strategy was discussed; UKRC view professional bodies as key stakeholders, who act as influencers, leaders and champions for the equality agenda. Yet, at the same time, it can be difficult to get these organizations to look reflexively at their own working environment and to what extent they implement equality policies. The idea that some organizations don’t know how to implement these policies was raised and some of the initiatives that UKRC SET are engaged with may provide steps to tackling this issue. This initiative includes the SPIDER (STEM Professional Institutions Diversity and Equality Resources project) network and the SET Fair Standard, which recognizes good practice.

Integrating science, education, employment and gender policies is, at times, difficult to reconcile coherently. It can feel difficult or inappropriate to raise gender concerns in wider policy areas. The Research Excellence Framework can be used as an example of why it is important to consider a gendered perspective. The proposed system shifts more emphasis to impact and mobility, which could inadvertently disadvantage women. At the same time, it is felt that more emphasis on the work environment in the funding assessment criteria could provide an incentive for higher education institutions to incorporate equality policy into their employment practices.

With key policy papers such as ‘Higher Ambitions’ and ‘Innovation Nation’ largely ignoring gender equality issues, it has become all the more important to proactively introduce these issues to the agenda, rather than waiting to respond. However, it is important that the Government encourages coherence between the legislation and stakeholders, as well as the disparate Government departments responsible for science and gender policies if we are to ensure that women in science are recruited and retained.


References
1. Policy Proposals: The business of equality, UKRC SET