

The Royal Economic Society Women's Committee
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Economics in the United Kingdom is a male-dominated profession. Although it has long been informally recognised that most professional academic economists here are men, there was no organisation which tried to redress the balance by promoting the role of women. Around 1995, however, things began to change. At that time there was no reliable data about the gender balance of the UK profession - there was, however, a general concern among members of the Royal Economic Society that women were not being attracted to the profession. A working party was set up to consider the situation and to make recommendations. Out of this came the Royal Economic Society Women's Committee, established in late 1996 and now a standing committee of the Royal Economic Society. In many ways, the RES Women's Committee has been inspired by CSWEP.

The working party set out, first, to establish the evidence. Maybe it is no coincidence that it was chaired by an econometrician! The data on the academic sphere was elicited by sending a questionnaire to Heads of Economics Departments in December 1996. The response rate was good (92%). Other groups of economists were identified and included in the survey. We found that there are 2346 people working as economists in academic appointments in the UK. Most of these people (85%) are working in standard academic appointments (ie., mixed teaching and research jobs as opposed to research-only appointments). Women make up 13% of this standard academic workforce, although their representation across seniority levels is far from even: approximately 30% of the research/PhD students, 15% of the lecturers, 10% of the readers/senior lecturers and 5% of the professors. (For broad comparative purposes, a lecturer in the UK corresponds to an assistant professor in the US, a senior lecturer to associate professor and a UK professor to full professor in the US.) We also found these ratios to be strikingly similar in new universities, old universities, departments with a higher than average research ranking, and those ranked below average.

We also asked about new hires in the previous 12 months. Although we suspect that this flow data is less reliable than the information on the stock, it does give some indication of the dynamics of the process. There were 49 new permanent lecturers hired, 13 of whom were female. The 13 new hires increased the relative stock of permanent female lecturers by some 0.7 of a percentage point. If this trend continued, it would take another 10 years or so to bring the relative stock of permanent female lecturers up to the proportion in the inflows of 26.5%. At the more senior academic levels the majority of inflows are probably due to promotion of which there are no data available yet. Nevertheless, new hires into these grades over the last 12 months did little to change the relative employment position of women amongst the senior grades.

A comparison of the economics data with official published data for other disciplines reveals that the broad pattern in economics is very similar to science in the UK - and quite distinct from that of the social sciences in general. For example, around 5 percent of professors and 20 percent of lecturers in science are women, whereas the corresponding percentages for social science are 10 and 35 respectively. We are not sure whether this is also the case in other countries.

Alongside this, the working party also looked at the gender balance within the Government Economic Service. The overall pattern there is strikingly similar to that for academic economics, however, women constitute a substantially higher proportion of entry level professional economists in government (nearly 30 percent) than in academic economics. Furthermore, historical data indicate that the representation of women in the Government Economic Service has increased over the last ten years, especially in the more senior grades where the average promotion rates are now similar for both genders.

Collecting this data has raised at least as many questions as it has answered. Why is the representation of women at the entry level of professional economist in government nearly double that in academic posts? Do women research students perceive that there are barriers to their progression in academia? Is the lack of role models an issue? The RES Women's Committee is beginning to address these and other questions.

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