

## **Does academic economics put off women?**

30 percent of all students training for a PhD in economics are women. But only 15 percent of all academic economists are women, and only 5 percent of economics professors are female.

These proportions will not be unfamiliar to those in academic life. In the past all of academia was like this, and currently anyone in a Science Department of a UK University will see a similar gender balance. Undoubtedly the distribution is in part simply a cohort effect. Twenty years ago fewer women in Britain studied economics, so the ratio of men and women who are aged 40 plus, and who are now in more senior positions, will reflect this. But this cohort effect cannot explain the fall in the proportion of women in Economics from undergraduate level to Master's level, from Master's Level to PhD level, and the sharp drop at post-doc level. The PhD training is hard and long, so why do women make this investment and then not use it to enter academic life?

Unlike some other academic subjects, there is an active labour market for economists outside academia. Consultancy, the civil service and journalism are all professions in which economists can thrive, and indeed there are women who are prominent and influential as economists in these fields. Is it the case that the attractions of the non-academic life are stronger for women than for men? Is academic life seen as inflexible or macho? Do women feel the absence of role models? Or is this all irrelevant: do young women simply see themselves choosing the best, and this means the high returns of the City or business?

The Royal Economic Society wants to find out why women may not be choosing academic economics. That the RES should be interested in this is perhaps itself a sign of the times. The RES Women's Committee carried out a survey of economics departments and found the numbers cited above. The Committee is now examining the decisions made by individuals currently entering the profession. Recently, it held a meeting for women currently doing PhDs to find out whether the number of women dropping out of academic life was the result of perceived discrimination. While a number of views were expressed, reassuringly the overall tone of the meeting seemed to suggest this was not so. Around 2/3s or so of those present wanted to become lecturers or academic researchers. In the main the students saw the barriers to an academic career as ones that applied to both men and women: the lack of certainty, the intense competition for posts. Clearly the glass ceiling does not operate immediately after a PhD. This in many ways bears out what we see in other professions: there is no shortage of women at entry level.

On the other hand, many women did cite a lack of female role models, and there was some indication that those young women who had become lecturers felt much more isolated than the PhD students. This may not be surprising. PhD students tend to be clustered in a small number of institutions where women (and men) can form a self-supporting group, while women moving into their first lectureship are often the only female member of staff, and are in a sector where competition is high and resources scarce. But surprising or not, these feelings of isolation must be a matter for concern. Even if they are normal (and I've heard many academic economists say that 'this is the

way that it is'), do these feelings persist more for women than men so resulting in fewer women in academic life?

And if so, what can be done about it? None of us want positive discrimination whereby less well qualified women are promoted over men: few of us even want to be the obligatory token women on University committees and interview panels. Is the answer women-specific prizes at post-doc level, as the Royal Society have done? Or is it to make sure our male colleagues think about putting forward the names of good women as well as men for promotion, or to give external seminars, or for positions on editorial boards? Experiences overseas in promoting good women seem to have had an effect in the Sciences: can we in the UK learn from these experiences to get the best of both genders at all levels of our profession?

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