



The challenge of achieving professionalism and respect of diversity in a UK Earth Sciences department

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The Department of Earth Sciences, Durham University, has a balanced gender profile at undergraduate, postgraduate and postdoctoral levels (38%, 42% and 45% females, respectively), but one of the lowest percentages, relative to the natural applicant pool, of female academic staff amongst UK geoscience departments. There are currently 9% female academic staff at Durham, compared with a median value (in November 2015) of 20% for all Russell Group geoscience departments in the UK. Despite the fact that the female staff group is relatively senior, the Department's current academic management is essentially entirely male.

The Department has an informal working culture, in which academics operate an "open door" policy, and staff and students are on first name terms. This culture, open plan office space, and our fieldwork programme, allow staff and students to socialise. A positive outcome of this culture is that > 95% of final year undergraduate students deemed the staff approachable (National Student Survey 2016). Nevertheless, a survey of staff and research student attitudes revealed significant differences in the way males and females perceive our working environment. Females are less likely than males to agree with the statements that "the Department considers inappropriate language to be unacceptable" and "inappropriate images are not considered acceptable in the Department". That anyone could find "inappropriate" language and images "acceptable" is a measure of the challenge faced by the Department. Males disagree more strongly than females that they "have felt uncomfortable because of [their] gender".

The Department is proactively working to improve equality and diversity. It held a series of focus group meetings, divided according to gender and job role, to understand the differences in male and female responses. Female respondents identified examples of inappropriate language (e.g. sexual stereotyping) that were directed at female, but not male, colleagues. Males recognised the unacceptability of inappropriate language, but were unsure how it is defined. These differences have serious implications for professional relationships in our department, in which males occupy all positions of managerial authority and most academic positions. Such asymmetric relationships make it difficult for students and junior staff to challenge inappropriate behaviour.

The Department will hold a workshop for all staff, and student representatives, facilitated by the University's Centre for Academic, Researcher & Organisational Development, on "Professionalism and Respecting Diversity in Earth Sciences". The objectives are to: 1) define the boundaries between informality and inappropriate behaviour in office, laboratory and fieldwork environments; 2) encourage all colleagues to reflect on their own behaviours; and 3) develop a culture to empower individuals to intervene where inappropriate behaviour occurs. Outcomes of the workshop will be discussed in this presentation. Our immediate aim is to encourage positive change whilst preserving the best aspects of our open door culture. Longer term, we hope that by fostering a positive working environment, we will encourage outstanding female academics to work at Durham. The Department's objective is to achieve the average gender balance of the Russell Group geoscience departments over a period of 10 years.