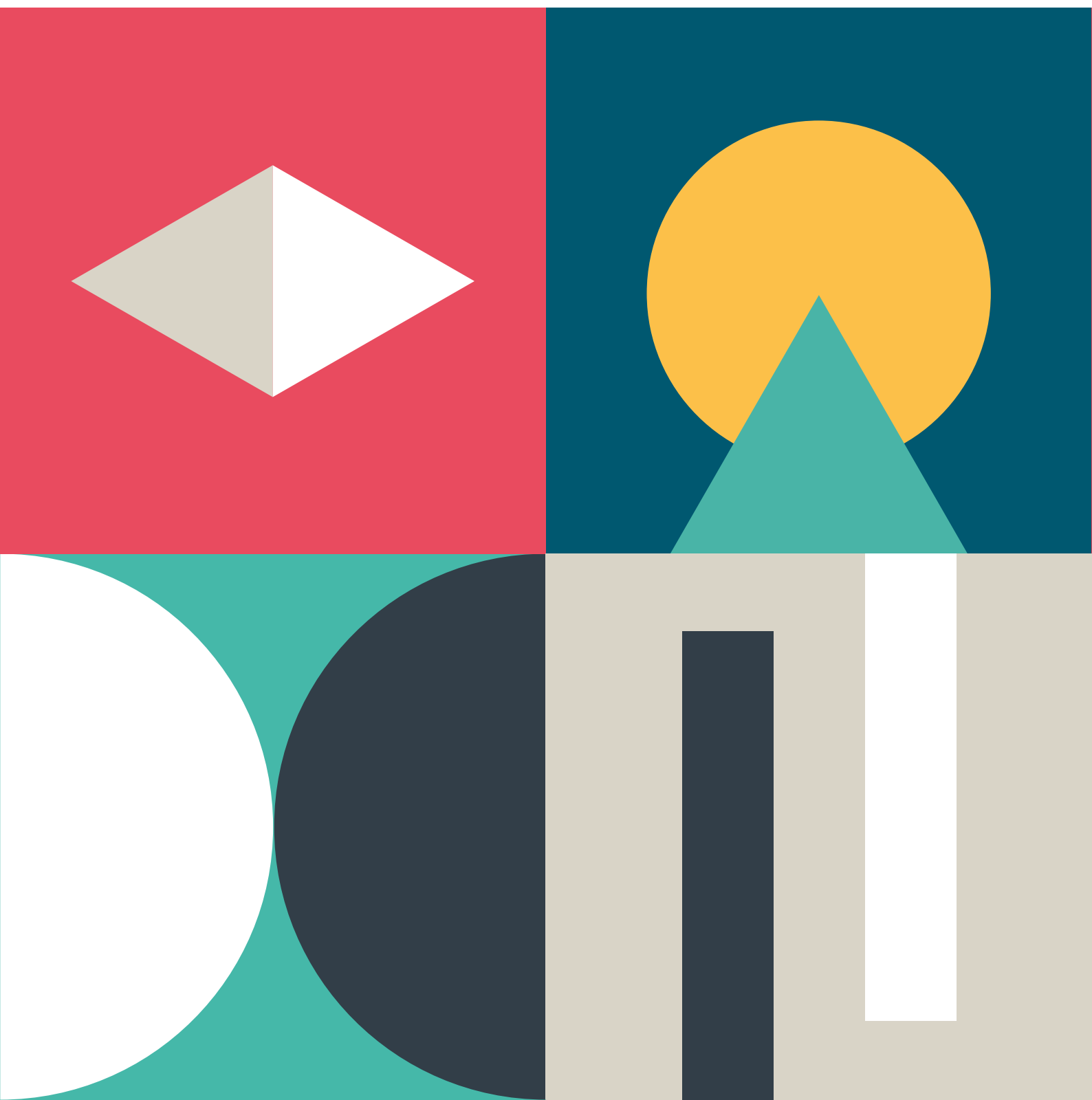


International Women's Day 2022: #BreakTheBias

A collection of perspectives on gender equality in HE



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International Women's Day 2022: #BreakTheBias

Imagine a gender equal world. A world free of bias, stereotypes and discrimination. A world that's diverse, equitable, and inclusive. A world where difference is valued and celebrated. Together we can forge women's equality. Collectively we can all [#BreakTheBias](#).

[International Women's Day](#) takes place every year on 8 March to celebrate and commemorate the countless achievements of women around the world. It's also a time to recognise the many gender inequalities that still exist today, and talk about what we can do to combat them.

It's staggering to think of the things that women were not allowed to do 50 to 100 years ago.

Women weren't considered to be a person in the eyes of the law, and it was only in 1929, less than 100 years ago, that women became persons in their own right.

A woman could be refused service for spending their own money in the pub. They couldn't become an accountant or a lawyer.

Only married women could access the contraceptive pill in 1961. The Equal Pay Act didn't come in until 1970.

I remember being at school and being absolutely outraged when I found out that I couldn't apply for a loan or mortgage in my own right.

In 1975 women were finally permitted to open a bank account or apply for a loan without a husband or their father co-signing on their behalf.

Women couldn't get a court order for domestic violence until 1976, or get legal or safe abortions or report marital rape.

One hundred years sounds like a long time, but evidence is showing that the Covid-19 pandemic has set women's equality back by 50 years in many places across the world.

International Women's Day is about celebrating women's achievements, raising awareness against bias and taking action for equality. We recognise there is still much to do and overcome but at Advance HE, we are sharing ways in which we are helping and promoting women's equality in higher education and providing a space for others in the sector to share their perspectives and challenges, and propose solutions.

In this blog collection you will find perspectives on women in leadership, intersectionality and allyship among other stories in celebration and support of women in higher education.

Alison Johns

Chief Executive, Advance HE



“I am proud to follow in the footsteps of “The London Nine” and uphold London’s legacy as a pioneer of progress in women’s education.”

International Women’s Day 2022: the London story

Dr Diana Beech, Chief Executive Officer of London Higher, the representative body for the UK’s largest regional higher education powerhouse, celebrates and shares the success of women in leaderships roles across HEIs in London.

In May 1869, nine women were preparing to sit their university examinations. The year before they had become the [first female students in Britain to be admitted to university](#), at the University of London.

Now known as “The London Nine”, these women paved the way for today’s female students, who make up [57 per cent of students in higher education in the UK at all levels of study](#).

As the current female Chief Executive Officer of London Higher – the representative body for over 40 universities and higher education colleges across the Greater London region, including the University of London – I am proud to follow in the footsteps of “The London Nine” and uphold London’s legacy as a pioneer of progress in women’s education.

Last year, in July 2021, the London Higher group held a significant vote of its own, which saw Professor Amanda Broderick, Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of East London, elected as our first female Chair since London Higher’s inception in 1999.

I am also proud that, today, exactly 50 percent of London Higher’s Board members are women, with Professor Broderick joined on our Board by Professor Wendy Thomson CBE of the University of London; Professor Jenny Higham of St George’s University of London; Professor Lynn Dobbs of London Metropolitan University; and Professor Frances Corner OBE of Goldsmiths, University of London.

Further to this, over the past year we have completely refreshed London Higher’s network offering so that three-quarters of our dozen core networks are now chaired by women from across London’s vibrant academic and professional services community. Together, we are committed to creating truly inclusive and welcoming fora and shaping the future of London’s higher education sector for the better.

In a diverse city like London, we are nevertheless aware that true progress for women must include equal opportunities for women from all ethnic backgrounds and faiths. Again, the capital has been a forerunner in the UK higher education sector in this regard, with Baroness (Valerie) Amos becoming the first woman of African descent to lead a UK university via her post at SOAS University of London between 2015 and 2021, and Egyptian-born Baroness (Minouche) Shafik becoming the first-ever female Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science; a post she has successfully held since 2017.

More recently, at the start of the 2021/22 academic year, Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE became the first person of African descent to be appointed as Principal of the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, as well as the first woman to be appointed to the role since 1942.

While we acknowledge there is still much progress to be made to make higher education leadership roles reflective of the full diversity of wider society, I am optimistic that London's higher education community provides much hope for the future by nurturing the female students and staff with the potential to go on and become our sector's next leaders. After all, true success in this area will be measured not just by the successful women we have in place today, but by the talent pool we are building up for tomorrow.

In this vein, I should like to acknowledge Dr Zainab Khan, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Teaching and Learning, at London Metropolitan University for her invaluable work driving equality, diversity and inclusion in institutional practices and culture, not just within her own University but across London's collective higher education community through her engagement with various networks and divisions at London Higher.

Professor Taraneh (Tara) Dean, Provost at London South Bank University (LSBU), also deserves a mention for her passion for social mobility and gender equality, and her mentorship of a number of female academics at universities across the UK.

LSBU has itself just passed its [one hundredth anniversary of the first woman, Ida Bould, studying Engineering](#) at the institution and achieving the highest average mark in her class. This is indicative of London's legacy of promoting women in STEM. It is also a legacy that London Higher members are determined to build on through [initiatives such as that at Middlesex University London](#), which is currently offering six fully-funded British Council scholarships for female students from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan or Sri Lanka to address the continued global under-representation of women in STEM disciplines.

On this International Women's Day, in 2022, we can therefore be proud of just how far our capital has come since "The London Nine" first made history for women in higher education in 1869. And as a woman representing the collective power of London's 40-plus higher education institutions today, I am truly excited about the potential of the capital to continue to transform possibilities for women in the sector in the years ahead.

Dr Diana Beech is Chief Executive Officer of London Higher (@LondonHigher) – the representative body for the UK's largest regional higher education powerhouse in London. Diana was previously Policy Adviser to the last three Universities Ministers, and you can find her on Twitter at @dianajbeech.



“But you’re a man.” I still remember getting this response at a conference early in my career, after I had introduced myself as Imperial’s Athena Swan Coordinator. This was perhaps the most overt reaction I’ve received as a man working on gender equality. While I may have been unusual at the time, I’m glad to say that I now have plenty of male colleagues contributing to and leading on gender equality work, including Athena Swan.”

Men: how will you commit to break the bias this International Women’s Day?

For our International Women’s Day 2022 blog collection, #BreakThe Bias, Rob Bell, Athena Swan Coordinator at Imperial College London, shares his thoughts of working on gender equality as a man.

“But you’re a man.” I still remember getting this response at a conference early in my career, after I had introduced myself as Imperial’s Athena Swan Coordinator. This was perhaps the most overt reaction I’ve received as a man working on gender equality. While I may have been unusual at the time, I’m glad to say that I now have plenty of male colleagues contributing to and leading on gender equality work, including Athena Swan.

When it comes to working on gender equality, or other aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), gender should be irrelevant. Beyond everyone’s personal responsibility in how they act and behave, we shouldn’t expect an under-represented group or those suffering from discrimination to solve issues, especially when it comes to institutional or systematic barriers. Gender inequality affects men too, and all genders need to be involved in addressing it.

However, in practice, I think most of us would imagine women being the ones who are actively progressing gender equality, particularly when it comes to Athena Swan and in STEMM fields, and have examples to demonstrate this. But I do feel that things have changed since I started working on Athena Swan at Imperial over 10 years ago. At that time, I was often the only man in meetings (and only member of Professional Services, though that’s another blog post!) and only rarely was there another man who had formal responsibility for Athena Swan or some aspect of gender equality. Looking back on our data, I think all of our department Athena Swan leads were women.

Today, by contrast, almost half of our Athena Swan / EDI leads are men, with almost all our academic departments holding awards - and I think it's important to also note that committees are developing formal remits beyond gender equality, and are acting on the whole range of EDI challenges and adopting intersectional approaches. I feel confident that I could engage in a positive and productive conversation about gender equality anywhere in the College. I can point out examples of active men across Imperial, such as Chris Peters, Mark Burgman and Nilay Shah. Stephen Curry, our Assistant Provost (EDI) is male, and our previous Provost, James Stirling, was responsible for increasing department engagement with Athena Swan, by setting a clear value on the role the Charter could play in removing barriers and addressing gender equality.

There is definite value for a university in using the Athena Swan Charter as an external framework. As with any such scheme, the value depends on the commitment and effort put in, but the Charter is useful in getting people and organisations to assess data, acknowledge bias, and develop actions to address their own specific issues.

Recently, I have been reflecting more on the Charter, and its value in progressing gender equality, thanks to Imperial's involvement in the [British Council's Women in Science: UK-Brazil Gender Equality Partnerships programme](#). The programme involves UK universities sharing our experiences of Athena Swan with our Brazilian partners, to help them make progress their gender equality journeys. The Athena Swan Charter model has inspired activity and expanded across the globe, and Brazil may be the next country to adopt or adapt the framework.

From our initial meetings, it seems to me that there are similar gender equality challenges in Brazil, and Athena Swan could be a useful framework for the country. One of these challenges is the existence of cultural barriers about the importance and necessity of tackling gender inequality, and the active engagement of men. I've noticed that at the big online Zoom meetings organised by the British Council, it appears I am once again one of a small number of men involved.

There are plenty of resources out there which cover the basic elements of effective allyship or becoming an active bystander. One of the things I'm often conscious of at meetings and events, for example, is to ensure that I'm giving the opportunity for women to speak first, and that I support and acknowledge their voices. To truly 'break the bias' around gender equality work though, we need men to take active and leading roles, be that through Athena Swan or other means.

So for all the men out there reading this blog, for this year's International Women's Day, how will you commit to 'break the bias'?

Rob Bell has worked at Imperial College London on Athena Swan since 2010, assisting and advising on institution and department applications. He also acts as an Athena Swan Reviewer and Charters Associate for Advance HE.



“One thing that is really changing in the world of work is that we are now seeing less and less of the master – servant, leader – employee relationship. More and more we are seeing that it does not matter what grade you are but that you are responsible for leading your own work and managing the relationships within your own sphere of influence.”

Addressing gender bias through Aurora in technical services at Manchester Metropolitan University

Reflections from the Technical Services team at Manchester Metropolitan University working with technicians across disciplines to build on their leadership potential through the Aurora programme.

Aurora is the Advance HE programme designed to empower women to seek leadership roles in higher education and achieve leadership success.

Advance HE has always worked closely with the Aurora Champions often bringing the community together to understand the opportunities and challenges in advocating for gender diversity in leadership, to hear champions (and other professionals associated with Aurora) feedback on the programme and to provide a networking opportunity for champions to share best practice.

One such Aurora champion is Natalie Kennerley, Technical Services Development Manager at Manchester Metropolitan University. Natalie is part of the Technical Services leadership team, working with Dr Kate Dixon, Director of Technical Services. Dr Dixon said she had always been acutely aware of the imbalance between men and women in leadership roles in higher education, particularly in technical roles.

Dr Dixon referenced research by the University of Nottingham in 2019 and a report supported by the Technician Commitment which revealed that there was an imbalance across the board, with 58 per cent of technicians being male, with just 11 per cent of technicians in physics and engineering being female, and a decline in the number of female technicians from the age of 30.

The majority of technicians with managerial positions were male, even in subject disciplines where the majority of staff were female.

She said: “Historically, some of the opportunities for leadership development were not available for technicians, which is apparent from these figures. I am pleased that the tide has begun to turn and that there is now a better balance.”

Dr Dixon had also experienced a lack of confidence in female technicians to put themselves forward for leadership roles and she believed this was where Aurora could play a key part. “We needed to help them to believe they could be brilliant leaders,” she said.

One of her key objectives was to establish a pipeline of women who would be confident to apply for leadership roles. She said: “I have found that women technicians tend to focus on the elements of the role they are not comfortable with, even if that is only ten per cent of the whole job description, and we needed to find ways to address that mindset.”

With that aim in mind, Dr Dixon has, with the full support of Manchester Metropolitan University, been working with technicians across the disciplines to build on their leadership potential through the Aurora programme.

The delegates are at different stages in their programmes but offer a wealth of anecdotal evidence on the value of Aurora. All are agreed that it has boosted their confidence and made them think differently about their roles.

One of those at the start of her journey is Christa Harding, Technical Officer in Sport and Physiology. She said: “Even after just a couple of sessions, I feel my ambition and confidence will improve massively by the end of the programme. I have learnt so much about myself already and what I can do going forward to improve myself personally.”

Carol Hardbattle, a Technical Team Leader for the Science and Engineering Resource Centre at the university, described her struggle with “imposter syndrome” and how it had coloured her approach before becoming part of an Aurora cohort. “It has given me belief in myself,” she said. When I started the programme I had only just become a team leader. It has helped me grow within my role and to become a competent leader.”

Jane Eaging, Technical Services Manager for Molecular Sciences, also found the experience a positive one, benefitting from the experiences of and issues faced by other members of her cohort. “I moved from being a manager to becoming a leader,” she said.

Clare Dean, now a Technical Officer for Environmental and Physiology, was still an Assistant Technical Officer when she took part in Aurora. She said: “I had spent a lot of time in education and then moved on to entry-level jobs. Aurora was my first opportunity to think about leadership and it planted the seed. It made me think about how my actions affect other people and I learned how to conduct myself in a more senior role.”

Lucy Lloyd-Ruck is Technical Services Office Co-Ordinator and PA to Dr Dixon and has benefitted in terms of learning how to influence events. She said: “Aurora came at a really good time because I was leading an environmental sustainability programme across Technical Services and it gave me the ability to act more strategically.”

Each of the women taking part in Aurora have a mentor at their institution and this is seen as an important part of getting most of the programme, with the mentor aiding understanding of how their role sits within the organisation and how the programme applies to their own individual needs and aspirations.

Dr Dixon said: “One thing that is really changing in the world of work is that we are now seeing less and less of the master – servant, leader – employee relationship. More and more we are seeing that it does not matter what grade you are but that you are responsible for leading your own work and managing the relationships within your own sphere of influence. Aurora is a fantastic tool to equip and enable women to succeed.”



“As an Aerospace Engineering undergraduate, I really struggled with being labelled as a ‘female engineer’ and almost actively fought against feminism. I was there on my merits, had done what I wanted to do, and it did not matter I was female. Even into my academic role, I just wanted to encourage and enthuse anyone into a passion for STEM. I did not feel comfortable with ‘women only’ events for recruitment or targeted scholarships, for example.”

Aurora – the continued journey

Deputy Head of the School of Mechanical, Aerospace and Automotive Engineering at Coventry University, and 2019 Aurora graduate, Caroline Lambert, shares her own perceptions and challenges regarding gender bias for International Women’s Day 2022.

In October 2019, I wrote a [blog for Advance HE highlighting my less than linear career path and my Aurora experience](#). My main ‘theme’ was that of expected pathways versus desired pathways and how it takes courage to deviate from the ‘expected’ path.

It was very much focused on my career in academia. Re-reading that blog though and in response to the [International Women’s Day 2022 campaign theme #BreakTheBias](#), I started to look further back as to how I came to where I am in the first place and what experiences, challenges and opportunities I have faced along the way.

I feel supremely fortunate that I have not knowingly been a ‘victim’ of conscious bias, and had never really noticed unconscious bias. Currently, for example, I am in an HE School management team of eight that is 50/50 split.

As an Aerospace Engineering undergraduate, I really struggled with being labelled as a ‘female engineer’ and almost actively fought against feminism. I was there on my merits, had done what I wanted to do, and it did not matter I was female. Even into my academic role, I just wanted to encourage and enthuse anyone into a passion for STEM. I did not feel comfortable with ‘women only’ events for recruitment or targeted scholarships, for example.

That was until I had a good chat with one of my female students who opened my eyes to the fact that I was the exception not the rule. She had come from a comprehensive school background, where she was the only girl in her Physics class. She wanted to be an engineer and was not being actively encouraged at school. The open day she came to at Coventry happened to be one that I led – delivered the course talk, took questions, organised the tour of facilities – and she told me that is why she came. She finally saw someone like her, doing what she wanted to do.

I was an only child of parents who supported me in everything I wanted to do. I passed the 11+ and went to an all girls' grammar school where I never had to 'fight' against what I should and should not be doing as a subject. Our careers support suggested eight different engineering options would be the best for me.

The first time I was in the minority, doing what I wanted, was as a fresher at university but by then, I was 18 and focused and determined in what I did. It was at university that I also found rugby, a sport I still play 26 years later.

My Dad was asked once 'are you disappointed that you did not have a son?'! The statement in itself is shocking and insensitive but his response was great. He said I have a daughter who is an engineer and a rugby player – I have the best of everything!

That 'light bulb' moment with my student showed that, actually it was exactly people like me that needed to show what was possible and that bias should not exist, changed my attitude and shaped a lot of what I do now. I became the university lead for [Athena Swan](#) in 2011 and spearheaded our initial institutional Bronze award application in 2012, which was successful. I continue to be an active member of our self-assessment team and the university/faculty level EDI committees.

I became a more active STEM Ambassador and have done a number of workshops and talks to various schools – comprehensive, grammar with a high percentage of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students where their family culture may also perpetuate the bias. I have also worked on our open day and [outreach activities to make them more inclusive](#), through a grant from HE STEM programme.

When reflecting, I have realised that a lot of the confidence and courage that I had to deviate from the linear pathway and explore other options was due to being well encouraged and supported. Female-targeted events are designed not for the likes of me, they are for those that don't have that exposure and opportunity. It is vital that people like me are part of those activities to continue to break down the barriers and the bias.

I now have my own children, a son aged 12 and daughter aged 8. My son loves rugby, cricket, drama and enjoys science subjects at school and my daughter plays rugby and dance and wants to be an artist! I have tried to follow the example set for me and encourage them to explore whatever they want to and support them through whatever decisions they make (although I'm very happy they both like rugby!!!).

I may not have had a specific role model myself but to know I could be (and was!) that for even just one other person to be able follow their dreams is a great feeling.

[Caroline Lambert](#) is Deputy Head of the School of Mechanical, Aerospace and Automotive Engineering at Coventry University. She spearheaded 'Activity Led Learning' within the engineering faculty and is a Senior Fellow. She has worked full-time and part-time at various academic levels from teaching-only to management.



“As a Black female academic, my pledge is to support UK higher education institutions to build a strong pipeline of Black academics and to increase representation at the most senior level in academia.”

Achieving gender parity in leadership

As we celebrate the International Women’s Day 2022, Dr Jummy Okoya explores some of the biases that are making it impossible for many organisations to achieve gender parity in leadership and explains what organisations can do to #BreakTheBias.

This year’s theme for International Women’s Day is #BreakTheBias, whether that be the bias of stereotype, discrimination or self-sabotaging beliefs. There are many unseen barriers which serve as stumbling blocks in the ascension of women into senior leadership, some of which are personal and other organisational. Self-limiting bias are self-created and ingrained beliefs which a person may have nurtured for many years and becomes part of the internal dialogue of the person.

As a female leader and leadership development coach, my experience of working with other women highlights the fact that many of the challenges faced by women in the workplace, irrespective of the sector, are very similar, although some sectors are more so than others. Often times women play the role of orchestrator in family life acting like the machinery that makes everything happen, and whilst doing so they also have to balance the demands of their career. This sometimes put women in a precarious position of having to choose between these two important aspects of their identity.

Several pieces of research have established the many benefits of gender diversity for organisations, hence organisations need to be more proactive if they are to harness the benefits of having more [women in the workplace](#); creating an inclusive environment, having the leadership team on board and continuously embracing a learning culture where bias is challenged and working towards eradicating it.

If organisations are to improve representation of women at all levels these five biases must be booted out. The first four biases identified below must be addressed at the organisational level, while the last one can be addressed at personal level with external support.

Gender bias in leadership

Many organisations openly state their commitment to gender diversity by combatting [gender bias in the pipeline](#), however there is clear absence of gender parity when developing a leadership pipeline. When women do not have access to the same development opportunities as their male counterpart, this causes career stagnation and even when they do their likelihood of succeeding is stunted.

What is evident is that there is more rhetoric than action when it comes to supporting women into leadership. Women receive less support and a higher level of stress when transitioning into a leadership position. These can be alleviated through leadership mentorship or a buddy system which serves as a support mechanism to ease the transition and ensure success of women in new roles.

Overlooked for promotion

A groundswell of research has been conducted which exposes the bias associated with women being overlooked for promotion. A study conducted by a Yale professor concluded that [women are not promoted because their managers underestimate their potential](#) despite women consistently achieving higher performance ratings than men, they were incorrectly judged as having less leadership potential. It is as equally a stark picture for [women with children](#).

It is not uncommon for organisations to be gender balanced or close to it at entry level but this number significantly reduces as you get closer to the top, this drop-off of women has been attributed to gender disparities in promotion rates, not gender differences in hiring or retention. To address gender imbalance, organisations can apply the Gender Proportionality Principle (GPP) which states that “a given level in an organisation should aim to reflect the gender composition of the level immediately below it.” GPP can be used to achieve sustainable significant improvement in [achieving gender balance at all levels](#) of any organisation.

Zero sum mentality

Another bias we must banish to achieve gender parity in leadership is zero sum mentality. This bias manifests in workplaces when male employees nurture the belief that they must sacrifice their resources or stature for women to get ahead.

Men are needed as allies to achieve gender equity but we must first eradicate [zero sum](#) thinking. Organisations can do this by amplifying the financial benefits of achieving gender equity for the company; connect diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) measurement to performance reviews of leaders as a way of making them accountable, upskill leader's knowledge on gender diversity through development activities, promote cross-gender professional relationships and integrate DEI initiatives interventions into core business outcomes.

Persistence of gender bias

Many research evidence alludes to the persistence gender bias in organisations and society at large, however what is more surprising is that organisations with balanced or [female dominated workplaces](#) are not immune to this problem. “Bias is built into the system and continues to operate even when more women than men are present.” Women still experience a plethora of biases such as constrained communication, lack of acknowledgement of their contributions, lack of access to mentors and sponsors and feeling the need to curtail their aspirations and ambitions due to personal circumstances.

Leadership identity shift

Whilst some organisations make gender diversity a priority by setting aspirational goals for ensuring women have a mix of skills and competencies and support through mentoring and training, much of these efforts do not translate into women succeeding in leadership roles. Having the right skills and competencies must be complemented with a supportive environment which supports a woman's leadership motivation and celebrates her efforts even if she falls short in some areas. Women more than men struggle with embracing their leadership identity by [internalising their leadership identity](#).

Leaders can create gender-equitable practices and environments by working on removing these biases highlighted above. Managers, leaders and organisations must demonstrate their commitment to [moving the dial](#) on inclusion by assuming a strategic approach to dismantling the challenges of gender inequality and adopting a [data driven approach to diversity](#). One of the ways leaders can show their commitment and motivation for inclusion is by [getting real with DEI](#), this can be achieved by setting DEI targets which are integrated into organisational strategy and attached to the KPIs of senior executives as a way of measuring progress.

As a Black female academic, my pledge is to support UK higher education institutions to build a strong pipeline of Black academics and to increase representation at the most senior level in academia.

Dr Jummy Okoya is a multisector leadership development and positive Psychology consultant focusing on EDI & Wellbeing with more than two decades' experience. A co-programme lead at Said Business School and the Chair of the Women's Network at UEL, she was listed among top 50 inspirational black women in the UK in 2019.



“You have got to tell your own story. You have to understand what you are able to break. You have to make peace with that particular aspect and not let someone pull you into a corner where you are made to feel as though you are less than. And this is one of the things that I had to overcome.”

Aurorans inspired to break the bias on International Women’s Day

The current cohort of Aurora celebrated International Women’s Day 2022 via a bespoke event designed to highlight how we can all #BreakTheBias with Dr Shirley Malcom.

To celebrate International Women’s Day 2022 and understand the theme #BreakTheBias, the current 2021-22 cohort of [Aurora](#), were treated to an inspiring talk by Dr Shirley Malcom from the American Association of the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

Aurora is Advance HE’s programme designed to empower women to seek leadership roles in higher education and achieve leadership success. Dr Malcom is senior advisor and director of [SEA Change](#) at the AAAS and in her more than 40-year tenure at the Association has worked to improve the quality of and increase access to education and careers in STEM.

Shirley began by explaining her background, sharing what it was like for women of colour growing up in the United States because she said, “It is absolutely crucial to talk about where we’ve been in order to understand where we need to go.”

Born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, the most segregated city in America, Shirley said there were some things about her life that were pretty much set because she was “a Black kid...with limited opportunities, limited expectations.”

A curious kid, she wanted to know how everything works and got into trouble taking things apart. “It was the kind of curiosity that tends to define those of us who go into the sciences, and engineering tends to give us the space where we can actually operate.

“But the world that I lived in was very different. It was not a world of opportunities, either for Black people, or for women.”

Schools were segregated. She was with kids who looked like her and only ever taught by Black teachers. “So it was a limited kind of a vision of the world that I actually had when efforts were made to stand up and ask for civil rights.”

Violence visited on the community and in Shirley’s own neighbourhood just three blocks away from church bombings in 1956, 1958 and 1962 showed it wasn’t just a lack of opportunity but an actual effort to curtail advancement. “Being and trying to move forward, was not easy.”

In 1957, when Sputnik, the world’s first artificial satellite went up, the United States urged people to go into STEM. “And I was one of those people who began to be taught science, and I enjoyed it...and I thought, I can do that.”

Showing a photograph of the control room at the Johnson Space Center in Texas with just one woman and lots of white men sat on desks, Shirley explained, “Nobody in there looks like me...I had to become something I had never seen. I had to imagine myself into a room like this.”

All her classes were “very male and very white. And so, again, I’m not being affirmed in terms of moving into this area, but I went anyway.

“My feeling was that I can make change. If I am willing to take a seat at the table, and to move forward into a leadership role in order to do that; if I wanted things to be different for others going forward; I’m just going to have to help make that.”

Shirley got her doctorate at Pennsylvania State University then became a faculty member. After that she joined the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and became much more involved in policy.

She said, “I learned that somebody makes the rules; somebody actually sets up the guidelines; somebody defines what excellence is. Somebody does all these things, and I took advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves in order to join that group.

“Because I began to understand that unless we were in the room, and not just on the edges of the room but seated at the table, that in fact nothing would change.”

When she was made was a member of the National Science Board she helped to change the criteria by which grants were given to include broadening participation much more focused on not only the research, but also the environment in which the research was conducted and who was doing the research.

“Identity does matter,” Shirley said. “It was very hard to be something I had never seen, and to in fact, have to imagine myself in the room.”

Visibility gives everyone the opportunity to tell our stories, she said, to talk about one’s whole self and whole identity. “Because it is important to those who are around us and behind us, that they understand the opportunities that are there.

“It’s amazing to me that anytime a woman wants to stand up, there’s always somebody who is ready to slap her down. You will always have detractors. The issue is whether or not you listen to the detractors. Whether or not you start to believe what they try to tell you about yourself.

“You have got to tell your own story. You have to understand what you are able to break. You have to make peace with that particular aspect and not let someone pull you into a corner where you are made to feel as though you are less than. And this is one of the things that I had to overcome.”

Shirley Malcom is senior advisor and director of [SEA Change](#) at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). In her more than 40-year tenure at the Association she has worked to improve the quality and increase access to education and careers in STEM as well as to enhance public science literacy. She is a former member of the National Science Board, the policymaking body of the U.S. National Science Foundation, and served on President Clinton’s Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology. [Find out more about Shirley and SEA Change](#)



“I learned my feminism in the nineties and noughties, especially at university. I recall feeling like a pioneer in my Masters in women’s studies, as my group of swashbuckling all-female friends swapped in-jokes about feminist writers and ganged up on The Patriarchy in all its forms.”

Leadership only goes as far as allyship

Marking International Women’s Day 2022, Wonkhe editor Debbie McVitty examines her own complicated relationship to feminism and the related debates that are shaping higher education.

I learned my feminism in the nineties and noughties, especially at university. I recall feeling like a pioneer in my Masters in women’s studies, as my group of swashbuckling all-female friends swapped in-jokes about feminist writers and ganged up on The Patriarchy in all its forms.

While it wasn’t, in many ways, a great time to be a woman – it was the era of the “ladette” after all – it was certainly easier for us to feel like we had the moral high ground and the light of truth and justice on our side than I suspect your average white middle class feminist does today.

Seeing better days

This generation of students - supported by some true pioneers in academia and civil society – is courageously confronting some awkward truths about the many axes of inequality, and as a higher education sector we are always grappling with the appropriate response to these realities.

Being editor of Wonkhe grants me the enormously privileged position of observing and commenting on how challenges of personal identity, injustice, and marginalisation emerge as “policy issues” for the sector, how they are addressed in public debate and in policy development, and how universities adapt and update their thinking and practice in response.

At the organisational level I believe Team Wonkhe has a moral responsibility to engage meaningfully with efforts to surface the lived experiences of marginalised groups, to amplify their voices, and share our platform. I hope that being a woman with some of that lived experience in my backstory makes a difference to my ability to see, connect with, and advocate for those concerns.

But on a personal level, like many who care about these issues, and want to make a difference, I struggle with my own complicated experiences of both marginalisation and privilege. The reality is that I do not always “see” – and can’t always make intuitive sense of – the experiences of those whose identity I do not share. And as a consequence, I personally and professionally, constantly fall short of my own ideals of allyship.

Sometimes my brain hurts

Part of this is the complexity of the field. For example, we’re currently in the middle of a major project exploring belonging and inclusion among students, with our partners Pearson. I’d become accustomed to making broad-based assumptions about the interaction of personal identity and marginalisation.

Yet the [findings of our first survey](#) of more than 5,000 students suggest that while there are some patterns to be identified that relate to students’ identity, there is much closer alignment between students’ sense of belonging and their reported levels of mental health, than with their identity.

We think this doesn’t mean that identity doesn’t matter to a sense of belonging, as much as that it interacts with other factors - course, institution culture, friendships, academic confidence – in complicated ways. And the implications for developing pragmatic and actionable policies for understanding and responding to students’ struggles with belonging and inclusion are therefore not straightforward either.

Part of it is – let’s be absolutely honest – the politics of identity. Strong feelings are a significant part of the HE sector, especially when it comes to allocation of scarce resource - witness the anger and hurt expressed by those taking part in industrial action. But the dominant culture is one of rational discussion and pragmatism.

I certainly don’t think feelings should take the ascendancy in making decisions about the future, but when it comes to considering diversity and inclusion, acknowledging the emotional consequences of marginalisation must be part of the ways through which we make our way to more inclusive terrain.

Yet in policy debate how do we accommodate anger, hurt, and passion, and what to those of us schooled in the more moderate, clinical analysis of issues looks like overstatement of the facts? Or the articulation of demands and expectations that go far beyond the settled view of what is feasible, or reasonable? Or the espousal of political views and positions that appear extreme and exclusive in themselves - especially at a time when fierce “rational” public debate about the principles of freedom of speech is masking an awful lot of political self-interest and emotional instability?

And part of it is - and this is very much a gendered point - is being the parent of a young child, expecting another in the next few months, doing the best I can in a demanding job that daily triggers every one of my vulnerabilities and anxieties, and as a consequence being so very, very, tired much of the time. I mostly feel like I’m stumbling through the day trying not to do anything too egregious, rather than “making a difference.” And sometimes, reaching for the easy or simple solution is all that I have time or energy to do.

Stumbling towards something better

But perhaps we could stumble together? I don't have a lot of patience with the current incarnation of the ethos of "self-care" that suggests that a bubble bath and a scented candle can act as a salve for a culture of overwork or a lack of decently funded childcare options – but I acknowledge the political and activist roots of the idea and the absolute necessity for those whose emotional and physical labour is too frequently drawn on by others to find outlets for joy, creativity, and rest.

I think, also, that we could talk more about how we can best care for each other, and act to band together to find those outlets and create those spaces for others in our professional lives. Certainly some of our most widely-read articles focus on HE culture, and the ways that individuals, teams, and institutions might challenge some of the less savoury aspects of life in universities (the competition, the workloads, the bureaucracy, the fear of loss of face) and further develop the best bits (super-smart colleagues, interesting conversations, and the constant stream of fresh perspective and challenge brought by each new cohort of students).

I'm agnostic about whether current discourses of kindness, compassion, and empathy can move the dial on the kind of structural challenges the HE sector is currently grappling with. But I can see that in the policy debate there is space for a bit more giving the benefit of the doubt, trying to walk in each other's shoes a bit more, and generally offering kindness and (authentic) curiosity before defensiveness and judgement.

Because while there's lots to worry about what divides us, let's be cheered by the thought that one thing that definitely unites us is that none of us have had enough sleep, we're all plagued with self-doubt, and we're all liable to put our foot in it most of the time.

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“Your bias may be ‘un’conscious, but that does not mean that it is not strong. Although race is an unstable concept, your racial markers are an important part of your identity and therefore lead to bias.”

Breaking the Bias

Dr Victoria Showunmi, Associate Professor and Chair of the Athena Swan at University College London Institute of Education, shares her thoughts on breaking the bias for International Women’s Day 2022 through an intersectional lens.

This blog explores the notion of ‘breaking the bias’ from the perspective of a Black woman. I’ll focus on bias in the workplace based on [my research](#) and drawing on my personal experience. The aim is to consider what bias is, how it manifests itself, and how we can face it head on, accept that it exists, and lessen the negative consequences of bias which are ubiquitous in our workplaces.

What is bias?

First, what do we mean by ‘bias’? We are all guilty of bias because it is part of the human condition. You forge your own identity by contrasting yourself with the Other, a person or people who are different from you. You have a strong sense of belonging to a range of groups with shared characteristics such as appearance, class, education and region of origin. You may also share the same interests.

‘Un’conscious bias and Blackness

Your bias may be ‘un’conscious, but that does not mean that it is not strong. Although race is an unstable concept, your racial markers are an important part of your identity and therefore lead to bias. If you are White, you are not Black. The more the racial marker of the Other differs from yours, the stronger your bias is likely to be. So dark Black skin, Afro curly hair and other stereotypical racial markers will differ more from the White norm and so attract more profound bias.

Imagine an interview panel. You are the only Black panellist. All the interviewees are White British or White European. You find it difficult to focus on the interviewees' responses, especially those who do not speak standard English. You have an internal bias against what you find you regard as less than perfect pronunciation of the English language. Where did this come from? You remember how your parents were always emphasising that you needed to speak properly and act like a 'lady'. They wanted you to assimilate into White middle class society. People find themselves drawn towards the person who sounds more like themselves. When an interviewee sounds more like the panel members, they are likely to be appointed. The Others are considered less suited to the role they have applied for [despite appropriate qualifications and experience](#).

Physical appearance and bias

Physical appearance is also very important. A Black person's hair should ideally adhere to European concepts of acceptable hair styles. Black women have to grapple with bias from childhood to adulthood if they do not keep their hair 'under control'. Black pupils are [excluded](#) because of their [hair](#). This is racist and unlawful. When Black women reach the workplace, their hair can become the focus, attracting unwelcome comments and requests such as "Can I touch it?". Hair cannot be left natural. There is an unwritten code that 'Afro' hair needs to be tamed because otherwise it looks 'rather wild'.

White privilege and acting white

Such strictures originate in white privilege. The norm is white, so society is designed around White people and their characteristics. People of colour must navigate their way carefully, avoiding behaviours which might be considered 'loud' to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Black women and girls at school, university, and in the workplace feel obliged to [act white](#) to blend in as far as possible to become more acceptable. Nevertheless, Black women are not seen to conform to traditional [feminine tropes](#) of 'beauty, grace, elegance, and good social manners'.

The emotional burden of intersectional discrimination

Constantly acting white is an enormous strain. Black women are like actors who never leave the stage. They risk losing sight of their authentic selves. They do not like to complain; [Hancock \(2020\)](#) and [Showunmi and Tomlin \(2022\)](#) have shown that many suffer in silence as they experience sophisticated and everyday racism which results in indirect and direct discrimination, both as women and as Black women. Different forms of discrimination interact, primarily on grounds of race, sex and class. This intersectional discrimination has a detrimental impact on the life chances of Black women and leads to an emotional burden which risks damaging their mental health. It is vital to raise awareness of intersectionality as it enables us to identify multiple factors of disadvantage.

Strategies to break the bias

Recognising that bias is a fundamental human characteristic is the first step towards 'breaking the bias'. A summary of proactive strategies adapted from [Showunmi and Tomlin 2022](#) follows. They are designed to support Black women, but all advocates for social justice can encourage their use.

Questioning

Asking critical questions can help illuminate racist discourse and actions. Questioning allows us to confront racism. Direct questions require focused responses which can expose racist actions. Effective questions can help to 'break the bias' by triggering discussion and reflection.

- 1 Why do you believe that my race makes me inferior to you?
- 2 Can you repeat what you just said slowly?
- 3 Do you hear what you are saying?
- 4 What do you hope to achieve from this racist behaviour?

Empowerment

It is taxing to be Black in white society. Awareness of how we communicate is crucial. Empowering behaviours sometimes require:

- 1 Ignoring racism
- 2 Responding with dignity
- 3 Requesting a private conversation
- 4 Providing resources for learning about racial realities.

Caring and self-care

Self-care is essential to navigating everyday racism. The weight of racial stress is overwhelming and most Black people are not aware of its damaging impact on their emotional and mental health. It is important to find an effective outlet to release anger and frustration.

- 1 Keep a journal
- 2 Discuss how you feel with your partner, friends, counsellor, or religious leader
- 3 Meditate to maintain a calm and measured disposition
- 4 Join a support group
- 5 Exercise.

This blog provides food for thought. I have welcomed the opportunity to write it and I hope colleagues will be able to act and #BreakTheBias.

Dr Victoria Showunmi is an advocate for social justice in society, her research interests include gender race identity in the context of 1) [gender and leadership](#) and 2) [Black women's and girl's experience and wellbeing](#).

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