

Promoting Gender Equality and Leadership in your College

An eight-point checklist for self-assessment

Based on the responses of 470 women

Promoting Gender Equality and Leadership in your College

An eight-point checklist for self-assessment

The clearest message from our recent LSIS-funded research project (for details, see back page) is that there is a strong and widely-held belief among women working in colleges that there are significant barriers to their progression. This is especially true of black & minority ethnic (BAME) women. The biggest perceived barriers include flexibility in arrangements to support childcare but also a generally unsupportive attitude in many cases to women's ambitions and to women's professional development.

A healthy college culture is one in which there is clear communication and active dialogue on such important matters; it is also a culture in which there is clarity about where responsibility lies for the professional development of women. These emerge as the fundamental issues for colleges wishing to develop best practice.

Drawing on the 470 responses we have received, this guide will highlight some of the issues which can contribute to a positive and healthy culture in which the career aspirations of women can thrive and in which the needs of the college, including its image and quality profile, are served along with the needs of aspiring individuals or of those who lack the ambition to fulfill their true potential.

Checklist Point 1: Flexibility in Working Arrangements

Among our respondents, over 96% of second-tier and middle managers were in full-time posts. This reflects the many respondents who saw a lack of flexibility in working arrangements for management positions as a barrier to women's progress.

Checklist Point 1: Self-assessment Questions

- How much flexibility has your college shown over working arrangements for managers?*
- Are there management posts to which more flexibility might be applied?*
- Does the college promote such possibilities when advertising management posts?*

Checklist Point 2: Supported Career Breaks

Our respondents frequently referred to taking career breaks for child-raising as an obstacle to career progression. Organisations which support staff during and after a career break will enable more women to pursue their career further.

Checklist Point 2: Self-assessment Questions

- To what extent are staff actively supported during a career break, for example keeping them informed and inviting them to meetings as appropriate?*
- Are staff well supported on returning from a career break - for example, are they offered updating opportunities?*

Checklist Point 3: Work-life Balance

A recurring theme among our respondents was a perception that managers' worth was often measured by hours put in - 'living the job' - rather than effectiveness of outputs. This points to a perception that a healthy work-life balance is not compatible with success in management.

Checklist Point 3: Self-assessment Questions

- Does the college make explicit - for example through appraisals - how it measures success in any management role?*
- Is a 'long-hours' culture reinforced by examples?*
- Is there a policy encouraging a healthy work-life balance for everyone?*

Checklist Point 4: Building Self-confidence

A lack of confidence in their own potential to progress was the second most commonly-cited reason for women's under-representation at senior levels. This points to a challenge for most colleges' professional development cultures.

Checklist Point 4: Self-assessment Questions

- Do women managers chair key committees in the college and represent the college on external committees?*
- Are women actively encouraged to take on such roles?*
- Do women in your organisation participate in mentoring and work-shadowing opportunities?*

Checklist Point 5: Sector Networks and Events

Our respondents cited a need for organisational support to enable women to participate in sector networks and events such as those organised by the Women's Leadership Network. A college's effectiveness in providing such support could be measured comparatively easily.

Checklist Point 5: Self-assessment Questions

- Does the college measure its participation in sector networks and regional / national events by gender?*
- Are women actively encouraged to participate in such groups and activities - and is their feedback published to college staff?*

Checklist Point 6: Support and Encouragement from the College

Support and encouragement was seen by respondents as essential and often lacking in their organisations, with poor line management cited as an obstacle to career progression. Colleges will want to ensure that both women and men are encouraged to excel and to aim high.

Checklist Point 6: Self-assessment Questions

- Does your appraisal scheme formally encourage professional development and career planning?*
- Is there effective supervision and performance management available to ensure that all staff know how well they are doing their job?*
- Is the role of the line manager in both of the above processes clear and effective?*

Checklist Point 7: Addressing Obstacles Faced by BAME Women

The majority of all respondents, regardless of ethnicity, believed that BAME women faced more obstacles than white women. BAME respondents valued in particular sound equalities practices, access to professional development, mentoring or coaching, more role models.

Checklist Point 7: Self-assessment Questions

- To what extent are BAME staff actively encouraged to take up opportunities for mentoring and leadership skills development?*
- Are BAME men and women encouraged to participate in opportunities specifically for BAME professionals such as those offered through the Network for Black Professionals?*
- Are BAME women represented at middle and top levels and in the governing body of the organisation?*

Checklist Point 8: Sound Equalities Practice

Our respondents saw sound equalities practice within each organisation, and encouraged nationally, as an important enabler to gender and race equality in the sector. All colleges in the sector are required to actively promote equalities.

Checklist Point 8: Self-assessment Questions

- To what extent are governors, senior managers and human resources personnel aware of the particular obstacles faced by women?*
- Are there strategies in place to ensure that recruitment processes are fair and open, and seen to be so?*
- Are women represented at all levels and within the governing body?*

Background to research

An LSIS-funded practitioners' research project was undertaken by LSN and WLN between October 2009 and March 2010, supported by Protocol National and the Network for Black Professionals. The aim was to find out why women are so under-represented at principal level and what the barriers and enablers are to women as a whole and to black and ethnic minority (BAME) women in particular.

Eight regional research meetings took place across the country, at which 171 women and men participated in discussions. 470 women completed the follow-up online survey; participants were mainly middle and senior managers and BAME women comprised 7.9% of the online survey respondents.

For the full report, go to www.wlnfe.org.uk