



Public Body Mentoring: Encouraging Women to Play a Part in SET Decision Making

Pat Morton

Sheffield Hallam University, U.K.

Rachel Tobbell

The UKRC, U.K.

ABSTRACT

In the UK, women continue to be under-represented in public life. Although women do gain public appointments, increasing the rate of progress is very slow. For Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) related public appointments the participation of women continues to be lower than that in over all public appointments. The UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (UKRC) has been working since 2005 to improve women's representation specifically on SET related public bodies with a strategy that tackles both the supply and demand for women.

This article focuses on a mentoring scheme, first launched in 2007 to support women who are interested in gaining a public appointment, by helping to build confidence and knowledge in the recruitment process and to show the reality of public body work once appointed. The mentoring scheme, which lasts six months, has run three times achieving 75 partnerships between women mentees aspiring to participate in a public body with women and men as mentors who are already serving on public bodies. Each of the three rounds has had an accompanying evaluation questionnaire completed by both mentors and mentees. The data from these questionnaires helps to provide an insight into the continuing and complex barriers to achieving gender diversity in public life as well as the benefit from mentoring in this situation.

KEYWORDS

Mentoring; women on boards, gender equality



Public body mentoring: encouraging women to play a part in SET decision making

BACKGROUND

The UK Resource Centre for Women in SET (UKRC) was set up in 2004 by the UK government in response to the *SET Fair Report* (Greenfield et al, 2002) for the provision of advice, services and policy consultation regarding the under-representation of women in SET. Part of its remit is to support government initiatives designed to increase the numbers of women participating in Science, Engineering, Technology (SET) related public bodies, defined as follows:

- A public body is a body set up by government ministers to advise on or undertake an area of public work operating at arm's length from the government department and minister. It may provide independent advice, have executive powers and / or deliver an aspect of public service (Cabinet Office, 2006).
- A SET public body is defined as one where members are advising on or active in science, engineering, technology and built environment related issues and where a SET qualification is likely to be a prerequisite of membership. In the area of SET, public bodies range from the Building Regulations Advisory Council to the National Museum of Science and Industry; from the Nuclear Research Advisory Council to the Human Genetics Commission (UKRC, 2008)

Figures compiled by UKRC based on Cabinet Office figures show that women's participation in SET related public bodies remained around 26% between 2006 and 2007 (UKRC, 2010). The Labour government, through the gender equality public service agreement, had set themselves a target to achieve 40% participation by women in all public appointments by 2008 (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2007). The target date was later deferred to 2011 (Patel, 2008). The strategy developed by the UKRC included a mentoring scheme to inform women in SET about public body work and encourage them to become involved in this work. The mentoring scheme was designed to be part of interventions that occurred on both demand and supply sides of the strategy. The demand side of the strategy included close co-operation with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA), an independent body whose role is to regulate, report and promote equal opportunities within public bodies, and working with departmental civil service staff involved in recruitment processes, to promote good practice in gender equality. The supply side strategy was to try to widen the recruitment pool via UKRC information networks to women who may have an interest in applying for a role. The UKRC ran a campaign with regional seminars to build awareness of public body work to women in SET and/or with SET qualifications. The seminars aimed to dispel some of the myths around public body participation and to ensure women in SET had sufficient knowledge about the process to consider applying immediately or in the future.

Mentoring is a popular concept adopted in situations where professional or education development needs are supported in a relationship. Mentoring focuses on developing the confidence and motivation of a mentee in helping them to realise their potential (UKRC, 2009). A good understanding of best practice in

mentoring for women in SET has been developed within the UKRC over time, drawing on a wide range of previous projects (JIVE, 2004).

The JIVE project, along with other schemes with a number of organisations, had confirmed that role model mentoring schemes (where someone with experience and knowledge can support and encourage someone who is at an earlier stage of career or someone who lacks experience) would provide the impetus for women to gain valuable board experience and make a contribution to public service. It was decided, therefore, to pilot the use of mentoring in helping to boost the supply of women for public appointments by pairing women who had indicated to the UKRC that they had an interest in public appointments with male and female mentors already serving on public bodies. The UKRC decided to include male mentors for this scheme because numbers of women on public bodies is so small. The mentoring scheme provided a high level of information and support to build confidence, awareness of the process, and increase the women's likelihood of applying for a public appointment as well as to widen the pool for potential recruitment in the future.

METHODOLOGY

The regional seminars described earlier had discovered through discussions with participants that women felt that they needed to have a better understanding of what skills and qualities were required and what public boards actually do before feeling confident enough to apply for a public body position. The UKRC decided that a role model mentor scheme could address this lack of confidence and awareness. The women mentees would gain an insight into the workings of a public body and the process of application through their contact with the mentor and the public bodies that they were part of. Through the programme, women taking part would get the information, advice and encouragement they needed to feel confident about making a strong application.

Recruitment of mentees for the initial scheme was promoted to women within the [GETSET database](#). The readiness of women interested in taking part in the scheme varied considerably from those who had already applied for a position and been unsuccessful, to those who were considering it as part of their future career planning. The scheme aimed to arrange 20 partnerships during the pilot stage. In fact 50 women expressed interest in being mentored and with support from OCPA, 50 potential mentors volunteered to be involved. The UKRC then began to match the mentors and mentees, and the first mentoring programme ran in 2007 for a six month period with 23 partnerships suitably matched.

As a number of the mentees had little or no board experience, we wanted to give an insight to what really happens in board meetings, so they knew more about what they were aiming for. As such, mentors were asked, wherever possible, to ensure that their mentee had the opportunity to observe a board meeting in action. A six month period had been identified for the programme as being long enough to allow interaction between mentee and mentor, and for the mentee to see a board meeting, but also short enough that very busy people (mentors or mentees) would see the scheme as manageable. Mentors and mentees were encouraged to stay in regular contact through the programme, preferably with some contact every 6-8 weeks via email, phone or face to face.

Matching criteria included: subject specialism, broader interests and geographical distance between mentor and mentee. The UKRC recognise that the matching process is important and that successful mentoring relationships result from establishing common ground on both personal and professional terms (JIVE, 2004). Since 2007 two further mentoring programmes have taken place with a further 29 partnerships in 2008/9 and 23 partnerships in 2010. The scheme included an opening and closing seminar for participants, which featured useful information and role model speakers.

Each programme has been evaluated through questionnaires to both mentors and mentees, providing a potential of 75 responses for each side of the partnership. The response rates did vary slightly between the programmes, but the responses overall were very positive, with the first round the highest at 81% and the last round the lowest at 70%. The questionnaires were undertaken online and consisted of 25 questions for mentees and 17 for mentors. The questions were a mixture of information giving, multiple-choice and yes / no responses, with the additional option to include comments throughout. The questionnaire included five sections for the mentees (about you, your participation in the programme, your mentoring relationship, what did you learn, how did we do?) and four sections for mentors (about you, your participation in the programme, your mentoring relationship, your experiences).

EVALUATION OF SCHEME

Mentors were most likely to see themselves as "sounding boards" and "advisers", while mentees generally agreed that this was part of a mentor's roles they were more likely to see "challenging thinking" as an important aspect of mentoring than the mentors. As one mentee (2008/09) commented:

My (male) mentor made me realise that in spite of having a long career break having 4 children, my rise from Lecturer to Professor in 10 years is remarkable and that my skills as a mother and as an academic should be applicable in many areas of public life.

The overwhelming view from mentors and mentees of the experience and the process has been positive, but the insights from mentees and mentors where things have not gone smoothly are useful for future similar mentoring schemes, linked to progression to public service.

One mentor found that the mentee placed too much emphasis on what a board position would do for her and virtually no consideration to the value she might bring to the board. Another felt that the mentee was very unsure and was "looking for the perfect fit" so the mentor encouraged her to "challenge her fear of the unknown"(2008/9). Scheme organisers need to take steps at the outset to set expectations of both mentees and mentors and to set clear and achievable objectives for the participating pairs. The UKRC did this at their opening seminar, but some participants still had problems with their expectations. Most mentors were impressed with their mentee. As one mentor commented "I was helping someone who was bright and just needed some pointers to improve their application" (2008/9).

Most participants in both the first and second round (mentees and mentors) were in agreement that the period was about right. In the third round just over

half the mentees who responded felt that 6 months was too short. Some mentors and mentees had problems in arranging meetings; other mentees felt they needed longer term inter-action to get to the right stage to apply. As one mentee suggested "It takes time to re-position oneself and 6 months feels like a pump primer rather than a sustained effort"(2009/10). Applications for public body posts inevitably take a long time and mentees are likely to have to make a number of applications before achieving success. The period of six months would usually mean that a mentor could only help with one application (if the mentee was 'application-ready'). The UKRC responded to these concerns by emphasising in the third round that the pairs should consider the scheme as comprising an initial core period of 6 months with the option of extension by mutual consent. The majority of participants have continued the mentoring relationship beyond the six month period.

Participants reported that contact varied between emails, telephone and face to face, with email and face to face contact the most popular. Previous mentoring schemes have reported that all three methods can work well (JIVE, 2004). Those who found it difficult to make and keep contact (both mentees and mentors) identified the importance of the matching process and the extremely busy and complicated lives that participants can lead as reasons behind lack of contact.

The majority of mentees were able to attend at least one board meeting with only one person reporting the experience as unhelpful. This mentee already had experience of sitting on private boards and found the experience very similar. Those who found it helpful were very positive, stating, for example:

It made the whole concept seem more realistic and seemed more attainable once I saw what is actually done there
(2007/8)

The work itself was extremely interesting on a professional level as well - it encouraged me to keep trying!
(2009/10).

Mentees' learning from all rounds of the programme has been wide-ranging., While meeting the primary aims of the scheme, that is to build confidence in making applications and awareness of how to make an application for a public body appointment, participants have also reported the wider benefits of having a mentor. Additional learning highlighted by mentees includes the following:

Although the initial focus was on public appointments, the mentoring really helped me in my personal development.
(2006/7)

The experience was invaluable in revising my CV and thinking through my strengths.
(2008/9)

It has opened my eyes to opportunities, given me immense support and confidence, and been instrumental in my career progression.
(2009/10)

One mentor explained how the mentee was encouraged to map her own networks of influence and note gaps in areas within her career while thinking about how to fill these gaps. The mentee soon realised "how important it was to be there and to be seen to be there" (2009/10).

WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

The scheme as designed had a long term goal - to support an increase in the number of women on SET public bodies. The lack of progression of women in SET through to the higher levels of decision making is a complex problem and there is no quick solution (Greenfield et al, 2002). Mentoring has been shown to build the confidence of women in order to tackle the barriers faced as they progress in SET careers (JIVE, 2004; UKRC, 2009), but it is only a part of the process needed to achieve change. The change in culture needed on the demand side in recruitment still poses a significant challenge. The women who took part in the scheme as mentees were at different points in their careers, so whilst some mentees were at the right stage in their career and just needed more insight and confidence, other mentees were planning ahead and were exploring a new direction. According to the questionnaire responses, the mentoring schemes have clearly had an impact on mentees' knowledge of public body applications and a positive impact on their confidence in making applications. While some mentees have learned they need to develop their experience and knowledge further before applying for vacancies, all those participating have reported that they were better placed to apply by the end of the programme.

The mentors have also responded positively to the schemes and have pointed out the importance of such interventions, as one commented:

There remains a significant challenge and programmes of this kind continue to influence board applications and membership - thereby ensuring a broader range of skills contributing to the public good.
(2009/10)

The mentoring scheme has also gained the support for greater participation by women of those who are already on public bodies. There have been at least five reported application successes, with one mentee from 2006/7 being appointed on several boards including as Trustee of the National Museum of Science and Industry. Mentors appreciate the input of the UKRC, as one said on receipt of the latest 2009/10 evaluation "it is a great programme and I congratulate you all at the UKRC on it. I am happy to have played a small part". Winning the support of those on public bodies is essential if the participation of women on SET public bodies is to grow.

CONCLUSIONS AND THE FUTURE

The mentoring scheme has been part of the supply strategy to tackle the under-representation of women on SET public bodies and, as such, it has been successful in widening the potential pool of applicants for public appointments in the future. Mentors and mentees have benefited individually from the scheme over the three years. In the UK a significant number of public bodies have been affected by changes in government funding and policy since the 2010 election, with a number of public bodies being phased out. As such, there have been relatively few opportunities to apply for vacancies available to the last cohort of mentees. Although the participation of women on SET bodies remained at 26%

for 2006 and 2007 (against a general decline in overall participation in public life) by 2008 women's participation on SET bodies had also declined to around 23.7% (UKRC, 2010). Due to the changes in existence and make up of SET bodies, it has not been possible to monitor participation year on year accurately. Clearly there are significant and complex barriers remaining in the bid to tackle under-representation, and a mentoring scheme for women will not achieve change on its own.

The latest annual report from OCPA covering the period from April 2009 to March 2010 reports that in the UK appointments and reappointments to public bodies are the lowest since 2001 (OCPA, 2010). The report also mentions that fewer women are being appointed / reappointed than last year (34.7%) to all public bodies (i.e. not just SET). The situation of women in public life is not improving generally, and it could be argued that the situation would have been worse without the UKRC interventions. While the mentoring scheme has improved the situation for a number of individual women, the trends continue to discourage participation in public life as a whole and for women in SET in particular. The mentoring programme needs to continue and to expand in order to have a sustained impact. The importance of correct matching of partners has been highlighted, together with a clear information briefing about the process and meaning of public appointments with a relationship period ideally being between 6 months and one year. Alongside mentoring, the work on recruitment and culture change within boards also needs to continue.

Unfortunately the government has now decided that the UKRC funding they have provided since 2004 will be phased out (although the UKRC itself will continue). It appears that the potential to increase the participation of women in SET public bodies has stalled with the cuts in public spending (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2010). It is hoped that the momentum the UKRC created through the scheme is not entirely lost and can be taken up again at some point in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

For the collation of all data and the idea for the article - Jacki Mason, UKRC, Bradford College, Bradford.

REFERENCES

BIS (2010) *Funding announced for HEFCE, Science and Research, 20 Dec 2010* Available online at <http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/topstories/2010/Dec/science-research-and-hefce-funding>. Accessed: 26.1.11

Cabinet Office (2006) *Making and Managing Public Appointments*, London: HMSO

Department of Communities and Local Government (2007) PSA Target 9, Gender Equality, accessed 14 March 2011
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/corporate/about/howwework/publicserviceagreements/publicserviceagreements200508/psa-notes/psa-target9/>

Greenfield, Susan, Peters, Jan, Lane, Nancy, Rees, Theresa, and Samuels, Gill (2002) *SET Fair, A Report on Women in SET*, London: HMSO.

JIVE (2004) *Breaking the Barriers: Good Practice in Mentoring: European Guidelines*, Bradford: JIVE Partners

OCPA (2010) *The Commissioner for Public Appointments Annual Report 2009-2010*, London:HMSO.

Patel, Lord (2008) Statement to House on 5 November 2008, accessed 14 March 2011 <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2008-11-05a.73.0>

UKRC (2008) *Employee Development Through Public Appointments: Developing Your Employees by Enabling Them to Fulfil a Role in Public Life*, Bradford: UKRC.

UKRC (2009) *Mentoring Good Practice Guide*, Good Practice Guide 13, Bradford, UKRC.

UKRC (2010) *Statistics; Women and Men in SET; the UK statistics guide 2010*, Bradford, UKRC.