

Women and minorities still face uphill struggle in UK science

Campaign group suggests 'quick wins' to begin levelling the playing field.

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07 May 2014



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Women represent only 9% of people in non-medical science, technology or maths careers in the United Kingdom.

Even with the government's attempts to increase the representation of women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities in science and mathematics, progress in the United Kingdom has remained too slow, according to a report published today by a UK non-profit organization.

"Looking back over the past five or six years, there has been lots of effort directed at increasing diversity, but not the huge step-change people were hoping for," says Sarah Main, director of Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) in London, which released the report.

Women, for example, make up just 9% of UK workers in non-medical science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) careers; non-white men are 28% less likely to work in STEM jobs than white men; and undergraduate students with disabilities are 57% less likely to study STEM at the postgraduate level than students without disabilities, according to the report.

Imran Khan, chief executive of the British Science Association in London, agrees that more needs to be done, especially for ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. "Until we get a science sector that is representative of the rest of society, we're failing," he says.

Quick wins

To get the desired change over the long term, the government and employers need to "embed thinking about diversity in all policy-making, not have it as an add-on", says Main.

But in the short term, the CaSE report suggests some "quick wins" — small changes that could be implemented immediately and give speedy results. One is to make 'unconscious-bias' training mandatory for all members of grant-awarding bodies and panels at the UK research councils, a policy that the Natural Environment Research Council has already implemented. Many universities also require it of their recruitment panels, says James Lush, an adviser for the Athena SWAN programme at Equality Challenge Unit in London, which recognizes universities with good gender-equality policies.

Another quick win would be to cancel the planned changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), which provides financial support for students for the extra costs linked to their disability. The government plans to scale back the programme, which could lead to cuts of up to 60–70%, according to CaSE. “The DSA has been one of the successes of the past few years,” says Naomi Weir, CaSE assistant director. “The retention levels for students getting the allowance is much higher than for disabled students who do not receive it.”

Political will seems to strongly favour greater efforts on STEM diversity, says Main. The UK government today launched a cross-government initiative to boost female participation in engineering and technology. That initiative includes funding from industry to boost salaries for physics and mathematics PhDs who teach in primary schools; the creation of 2,000 new entry-level STEM jobs and apprenticeships; and a compact that will collect pledges from companies and civil organizations to improve diversity. CaSE has signed up to the compact by pledging to ensure that it has no all-male panels at its events and to continue monitoring diversity in STEM fields.

Weir says that the government's initiative is a good start, but work on diversity needs to be about more than increasing participation in STEM fields at school and work. The structural and cultural barriers to entry and progression in STEM need to be tackled at the same time to get meaningful improvements.

“This needs to be the beginning of a concerted, coordinated effort, not the end result,” says Weir. “Otherwise we'll never get anywhere.”

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2014.15177