

On-line consultations on women in science

SUMMARY¹

Between March and July 2005, the Gender and Development Unit of the Human Sciences Research Council hosted a 16-week e-mail discussion forum. The forum was designed to gather views, opinions and recommendations on enhancing women's participation in (and benefit from) science, engineering and technology (SET) in South Africa. This study was commissioned by NACI in February 2005.

The structure of this e-mail discussion forum was based on other on-line discussion forums around the world, in particular a similar forum used by the British Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology in 1999.

While 261 people signed up for the UK forum, only 67 seven people contributed 165 submissions. Only 14 people, women between 23 and 53 years, signed up and participated in the South African forum.

For the South African e-mail discussion an asynchronous forum (where participants can contribute at any time during the day and not only while on-line) was used in an attempt to ensure flexibility and inclusivity. Moderators were trained to help organise, facilitate and encourage the on-line discussion and debate.

Publicity for the on-line forum included e-mails, telephone calls, posters, advertisements, a radio interview, links from relevant web sites, as well as announcements during key conferences.

To take part in the South African on-line forum, contributors had to register and provide comprehensive demographic information.

While the e-mail discussion forum was not an efficient way of gathering such information, it did produce some useful contributions and several policy recommendations:

- Negative cultural/social beliefs about the suitability of SET careers for women, educational practices that are detrimental to girls/women with SET potential and discrimination in the workplace were all identified as barriers to women entering and remaining in the SET sector;
- Policy recommendations from the forum included programmes to change society's negative attitudes regarding women in science, setting targets for women's participation in SET, and policies to eliminate discrimination against women;
- There were no contributions around research agendas.

Lessons learnt from this on-line discussion forum

- Re-design the pre-forum publicity plan to reach and engage a wider audience.
- Use web designers who understand the field of gender development;
- Host the forum on a dedicated website;
- Design the web site to draw attention to the discussion forum;
- Simplify the registration process considerably;
- Ensure the on-line anonymity of contributors (for those who wish to remain anonymous);
- Add a hit counter to show activity on the site;
- Design and post vignettes to create activity and elicit more active participation;
- Archive discussions in a more readable, user-friendly format.

¹ The comprehensive report entitled: "A report on on-line consultations toward the advancement of women in science, engineering and technology in South Africa" (published 2005) is available from the National Advisory Council on Innovation.