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Original Citation

Lawton Smith, Helen and Meschitti, Viviana (2015) Transforming Institutions by Gendering Contents and Gaining Equality in Research (TRIGGER). *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 7 (3). ISSN 1756-6266

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Transforming Institutions by Gendering Contents and Gaining Equality in Research (TRIGGER)

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The *Transforming Institutions by Gendering Contents and Gaining Equality in Research (TRIGGER)* project at Birkbeck is part of a five-country European consortium that champions the role of female academics in scientific disciplines. The project tests a blueprint designed to raise the status of women in scientific and technological organisations such as universities. Its nine actions will identify barriers to equality in the workplace and help “fix the system” so that gender equality is mainstreamed in decision-making processes. The rationale is that more equality will lead to enhanced career possibilities. These include better leadership opportunities with more women becoming entrepreneurial in commercialising their research.

In 2015, the TRIGGER project held two networking events designed to engage academia in debate with external organisations to identify how good practice can be introduced. These events were sponsored by the Birkbeck School of Business, Economics and Informatics, and are summarised below.

Event 1: What can academia learn from London’s business and policy organisations? – held at Birkbeck, University of London

The first event included leading academics and representatives from some of London’s major policy and business organisations, and was chaired by Professor Colette Henry, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and TRIGGER project board. The panellists included: Professor Henry Etzkowitz, Stanford University; Ms Jeanne Le Roux, JRL People Solutions Ltd; Professor Nick Keep, Executive Dean, School of Science, Lead, Birkbeck Athena SWAN programme; Ms Siobhan Martin, UK Board Member and HR Director, Mercer; Ms Jo Beill, Solicitor (Employment), London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham and Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea; Ms Sue Johnson, Senior Diversity and Social Policy Officer, Diversity and Social Policy Team, Greater London Authority; and Ms Nicola Cardwell, Senior OD & Development Consultant, Diversity & Inclusion, PwC.

The panellists described how large organisations such as major firms and public authorities have introduced a range of measures to tackle gender inequality to improve organisational effectiveness. To date, such measures have involved attempts to “fix the system”, rather than to “fix the women” (through encouraging them to “lean in”) or “fix the men” (through equality training for male leaders). Examples include:

- *Quotas*: These have enabled some organisations to make progress towards more equality in senior positions. In one City firm, there are more female Board members than male but, at the level just below Board, men are disproportionately represented, despite equality at lower levels. In another large company, the Board looks each quarter at the company’s gender and BME pipeline. The conclusion was that organisations need to push conversations about inequality further down the structure. Targeting should support an individual’s development from induction through to senior management.
- *Managers need to be accountable for their decisions*: Currently, academic procedures often mean that decisions can be hidden. While mentoring was highlighted as an important component of a supportive culture within universities, businesses now favour a sponsorship model. The sponsor is expected not just to impart advice, but also to give the sponsored junior staff access to “secret” networks and activities. One company example provided at the networking event places a firm expectation on the

senior sponsors to effect change within their business area. The implication is that programmes such as Athena Swan or the Aurora leadership programme in universities do not currently go far enough.

- *Information:* To change the system, it is important to have robust knowledge about where problems lie and clear evidence about the benefits that gender diversity brings to a business: understanding the points at which female drop-out occurs and why this happens is essential. Data are needed to understand where and how discrimination occurs. Transparency in salaries and promotion procedures facilitate understanding the nature of the problem. Academia is not transparent. Some big corporations are data-driven, constantly revisiting the numbers of women in their promotional pipeline checking for inconsistencies.

Three tips came from the panel. First, each organisation needs to find a way to make gender equality an issue for everybody. Second, supporting arguments with data is a good strategy for pushing people to change. Third, the path towards gender equality and diversity can be difficult; resilience is necessary and it is essential to celebrate victories.

Event 2: Career paths, gender and early-stage careers: learning from others and maximising potential – held at Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland

The main topic of discussion at this event was the persistence of gender inequality in career opportunities and in women's expectations of their future careers.

The Dundalk panel combined perspectives from high-level diplomacy with those of academia. Chair, Professor Colette Henry; panellists: Ambassador Rasa Adomaitiene, Ambassador of the Republic of Lithuania to Ireland; Professor Nola Hewitt-Dundas, Queen's University, Belfast; Dr Viviana Meschitti, TRIGGER Project, Birkbeck; Ms Amanda Kirk, Careers Office, Dundalk Institute of Technology; and Ms Shirley McCay, UK Trade & Investment, British Embassy.

Three main issues stood out from the discussion.

First, should women have a plan for their career at the outset to succeed? It was said repeatedly by the audience that women often lack the confidence to put themselves forward. Moreover, at DKIT, mature women students often do not have the same confidence as those who have recently left school. However, Nola Hewitt-Dundas suggested that a career is only one aspect of life. A career describes *who* we are and not *what* we are. Female role models have a powerful influence: Viviana Meschitti advised the women in the audience to be both mentors and role models.

The second was the uniqueness of the challenges to women in returning after maternity leave. The diplomatic service, like academia, requires staff to travel but for much longer periods. An academic career is an international career. Travel and balancing home and career are particularly challenging.

The third was the effectiveness of intervention. Nola Hewitt-Dundas demonstrated that of the 100 academic women who had been mentored since 2000 at Queen's University, half had been promoted. A senior Cisco female executive commenting on the lack of women in senior posts was quoted in the *Evening Standard* in April this year as saying, "Find the women".

For more information, visit: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/trigger>

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