



**The
Academic
Woman**

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July-Sept 2021

Celebrating women's achievements



**"My voice counts
as a woman and I
want it to be heard"**

Professor Sharon Peacock

**"It genuinely
offers me a
chance to make a
real difference to
others"**

Professor Katie Normington



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An ambition to bring out the best in herself and others, led Prof. Normington to think of teaching in a university setting.

The mission of *The Academic Woman* is to shine a spotlight on women in academia by championing recognition, well-being and positive action for more female empowerment.

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Time to thrive

Editor's letter

As I sign off this issue for print in mid-June, it is in the news that over 40 million adults in the UK have received at least one dose of the coronavirus vaccine.

This is meant to make us feel positive and hopeful for government to remove all restrictions on social contact, but the talk of new variants and increase in numbers have now quashed this hope. The 'Freedom Day' we so look forward to on 21st June has been postponed to 19th July.

Regardless of this delay, most of us will still feel grateful that we are at least able to spend the summer days with some family and friends.

As students leave their various campuses for the summer holidays, it is our hope that academics and those in higher education who have navigated successfully through the challenges that were brought by the pandemic are able to take some time to rewind for the next academic year.

As always, but especially in this particularly challenging year, it is my greatest privilege to continue to celebrate, champion and increase recognition for women in academia.

So this quarter, we are grateful to have Professors Lisa and Tom Jackson (p18) of Loughborough University share their academic journeys with us and how their individual personalities, rather than gender, have shaped their career trajectories. Lisa highlights how we can support each other and thrive irrespective of gender, ethnicity and race.

We are also delighted to share with you the insightful academic journey of Dr Ksenia Chmutina of Loughborough University (p24). Ksenia provides a fascinating insight into her research in disaster risk reduction and management, while showing us her passion for helping marginalised people who are affected by disasters.

Another delight in this issue is the report from one of a series of talks ran by the University of Cambridge this spring to highlight the careers of outstanding women. I am sure you will be amazed by the story of the remarkable and inspirational Professor Sharon Peacock (p10) – who went from working at a corner shop to becoming an incredible female leader who led and helped design the UK's COVID-19 pandemic response.

While we are talking about incredible leaders, we are very pleased to offer you our first feature on a Vice-Chancellor – Professor Katie Normington of De Montfort University (DMU). Listening to Katie on her journey into academia and her trailblazing leadership – from when she was Deputy Principal (Academic) at Royal Holloway to where she is now at DMU (p12) – I'm certain her story will inspire the current and next generation of women leaders.

I hope you are pleased that we are featuring and celebrating more senior women and I know that together we will continue to support one another so that we can thrive and reach our full potential.

Until next time,

Anatu Mahama

Editor-in-Chief





Driving change during the pandemic



Adèle MacKinlay

Adèle MacKinlay and Dr Jenna Townend highlight the continuing gender inequality in academia, and explain how they took the opportunity to address the issue during ‘the year of COVID’.

When we asked ourselves how long it would take to increase the volume of academic women at Loughborough University if we continued with existing practices, we were shocked. The answer was: never.

We realised that we would never shift the dial if we continued recruiting, promoting and retaining talented women in the way we always have. Like many institutions, Loughborough University recruits fewer academic women than men, academic women are promoted at a slower rate, and academic women attrite at a higher rate.

While 52% of staff at the university are female, women only represent 31.6% of the academic community. There are very few women in senior leadership positions and there are zero BAME women in senior leadership positions. We have, like others in the sector, a sizeable gender pay gap, primarily caused by a significant volume of women in the lowest paid work – our cleaning community, as an example – and a disproportionate volume of men at the higher grades.

Unless we can shift this dynamic, which is caused by societal norms as much as structural, systemic and attitudinal issues within the sector, the gender pay gap will not be reduced in our lifetimes and there will not be the equity of opportunity that the sector and those working in it need and deserve.



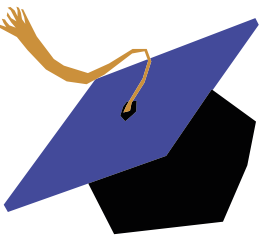
Dr Jenna Townend

Taking action

Those are the startling statistics, but what is the solution? We’re happy to report that, at our university over the last 24 months, there has been significant activity to change policy and practice regarding equality, to call out bias and to challenge systemic barriers to women thriving professionally. One of the most important initiatives has been the design and launch of a women’s network called Maia, which was formed in May 2020 during the UK’s first COVID-19 lockdown. Maia is named after one of Loughborough University’s alumnae, Claudia Sydney Maia Parsons, who was the first woman to circumnavigate the world in a car.

We founded this network because we wanted to engage with a diverse range of women who seek to learn from, work with, and support each other. We wanted to create a community with energy for and commitment to speeding up gender equity at Loughborough University. We wanted to help our members to be able to flourish professionally.

Maia recently celebrated its first anniversary, and we are exceptionally proud of what we have achieved. We have built a community of over 450 members from every area and job family across the university’s two campuses and have held over 25 remote events, including workshops and informal catch-ups.



Strategic priorities

We have achieved a lot by focusing the network’s activities around our strategic priorities of advocacy, mentoring and coaching, as well as recognition and development. To date, 65 pairs of mentors and mentees have been introduced through our mentoring programme and two senior male colleagues have led workshops to sponsor and champion allyship across the university.

Also, our ‘How to say when it’s not okay’¹ resource (created by Professor Liz Stokoe and colleagues in a Discourse and Rhetoric Group) has been widely shared within and beyond the sector, achieving more than 17,000 impressions when shared on Twitter.

In addition, we have held two fantastic events – a belated launch event and a one-year anniversary event – featuring lay members of the University Council, university alumnae and other external speakers. Maia members have also been instrumental in advocating for change to our recruitment and promotion practices.

However, it must be made clear, we are not about ‘fixing women’. We are striving to create an environment that supports women to be their professional best and are committed to challenging inequitable structures, systems, processes and attitudes. Gender equity is a human right and male allyship is essential to this.

Sharing success

Maia has been the most incredible experience of 2020-21. Reflecting on the project’s first year, we have identified a number of key areas that we believe underpin our success and we want to share them with others in the sector:

- A diverse and passionate leadership team is essential – there should always be diverse representation from all women in the university community, including academic and professional services staff and a wide range of job families. Never underestimate the value of having senior advocates and activists within the leadership team and in those connected to the network. Also, always engage with, and create opportunities for, colleagues who are normally ‘under the radar’, such as those in domestic services roles. Any successful network needs doers as well as talkers and the committee must pay attention to the importance of intersectionality in its composition and in how the network is run. Leadership opportunities must be available and committee positions need to be rotated to avoid colleagues getting ‘stale’.





- Online environments and their inclusivity and accessibility are key – never undervalue the power of five people knowing another five people who each know another five people and so on. Indeed, the online environment that has grown considerably due to COVID restrictions has made space available for everyone and has overcome distance bias. The platform has provided a variety of ways for colleagues to engage in events – whether just listening in to events or having their cameras on and engaging fully. At the same time, we are acutely aware that Maia must not exclude any colleagues whose roles do not require or rely on access to a computer. Members must be enabled to be involved, whether through leading or hosting events, helping with event logistics, or through formal opportunities... such as our newly created Social Media Coordinator role.
- It's important to understand and respond to the needs of a network's members – take cues from what members say they want to see in terms of events. Also, not everything has to be organised formally or feature a stellar line-up. Maia's agenda-free 'Connect over Coffee' sessions, for example, are informal opportunities for colleagues to meet and talk, and they have been a lifeline for many during the pandemic.
- A successful network must be part of a sector community – it is essential to make connections across the sector and harness the power and contacts of members to enable this, whether that's in relation to other networks, programmes or mentors. As an institutional partner, we cannot emphasise enough the value of working alongside the Women's Higher Education Network (WHEN) which has helped to speed up the pace of change across the sector. This has highlighted the importance of exploring opportunities to engage in research projects in order to enable change. For example, Loughborough University has recently launched a student and staff survey examining experiences of harassment and played a key role in WHEN's 'Sharing the Caring' ². Research project in 2020.
- A network must have 'teeth' – the committee we formed makes sure that Maia voices are fed into the formal groups or committees that drive change. It is essential for any network's members to be kept up to date about its impact as well as its activities... so communicate, communicate, communicate. None of the brilliant work we do matters if no-one is aware of what's happening!

Finally, in whatever work you do, never forget to celebrate every internal and external colleague – a little appreciation goes a long, long way.

Adèle MacKinlay is Director of People and Organisational Development, Loughborough University; Co-Chair of the Maia Network; Director of Development at WHEN (Women's Higher Education Network)

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Adèle and Jenna would like to say thank you to colleagues on Maia's committee for sharing the journey so far: Professor Sara Lombardo (Co-Chair), Deborah Bowen, Kirsty Carter, Tendai Dube, Emma Dresser, Sadie Gratton, Professor Amanda Daley, Amanda Silverwood, Professor Fehmidah Munir, Claire Jagger, Dr Eugénie Hunsicker, Dr Gemma Witcomb and Soph Dinnie.

1. <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/media/groups/maia/How%20to%20say%20when%20it's%20not%20okay.pdf>
2. <https://www.whenequality.org/research>



Professor Sharon Peacock

“My voice counts as a woman and I want it to be heard”

The University of Cambridge launched a series of talks this spring to highlight the careers of outstanding women at the university and inspire the current and next generation of women leaders. The aim was to get to the heart of the challenges faced by women in leadership and to share advice. One talk focused on **Sharon Peacock** – an incredible female leader who went from working at a corner shop to helping to design the UK’s COVID-19 pandemic response.



Sharon Peacock is Professor of Public Health and Microbiology at the University of Cambridge and Executive Director of the COVID-19 Genomics UK consortium. The journey she took to hold such senior leadership roles began in her very early years where she learnt the importance of social mobility. She lived in a working-class home where there were few books and they didn’t know anyone who had been to university.

The tripartite education system of that time placed pupils in one of three secondary school types – grammar, technical or secondary modern, with results from the 11+ exam dictating where students went. Sharon didn’t pass, which meant she attended a secondary modern where education focused on practical skills, with needlework and cooking figuring higher on the curriculum than English and maths.

Determined to go further

Sharon left school at 16 and it was while working in a corner shop that she saw an opportunity to work as a dental nurse. Driven by a desire to help and care for people – and to progress to becoming a healthcare nurse – she went to night school where she achieved GCSEs in chemistry, physics and maths then went on to gain A-levels at technical college.

Even after reaching the status of staff nurse, Sharon was determined to go further and wanted to be a doctor. The next stage was to work towards becoming a cardiologist at Southampton where she saw the opportunity to work in infectious diseases and microbiology in Oxford, eventually becoming a consultant running the diagnostics lab at a hospital while completing her PhD.

Many people might consider such incredible achievements to be sufficient, but not Sharon. Backed by a Wellcome Trust Intermediate Fellowship, she subsequently moved to Thailand (with her partner and three small children) where she ran a bacterial diseases research unit for seven years. One of her proudest achievements is helping to set up a diagnostic micro lab in Angkor Hospital for Children in Cambodia – and it’s still going strong.

COVID-19 rapid response

More recently, Sharon has played a pivotal role in the collaborative effort of the UK’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In mid-February 2020, she starting working with Government Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance on vital sequencing for the virus. He asked her to contact colleagues and by mid-March she had organised a round table in which 20 academics, public health agencies and NHS representatives worked together on the issue. This resulted in Sharon creating the academic-based COVID-19 Genomics UK Consortium (COG-UK) with her colleagues (and funding of £14.5m) and sequencing began at the beginning of April.

Leading a group of over 400 people who were pulled together in a short space of time to collaborate on such a critical project is no mean feat but Sharon characteristically downplays any difficulties.

Choosing not to have any level of authorship on the majority of papers produced and to “bend with the wind” in her leadership style, Sharon says: “It wasn’t about ego – getting the job done and how it would impact society was so much more important than what it meant for me.”

Today, a legacy project is in development, with COG-UK becoming a research network and public health agencies having their own sequencing network which would drive service delivery throughout England. This represents yet another huge career achievement for Sharon, who says: “When there’s this fantastic sequencing network in place, it will feel like I’ve done my job, That’s a reward for me.”

Supporting and empowering women

Looking back at her time at Cambridge, Sharon remembers that support for women and their mental health didn’t exist to the extent that we see today. Despite that, she was confident enough to say ‘no’ to injustices and to unfair expectations of women. Today, she urges women to look closely at the role they are playing

and to ask themselves some key questions. Do I have a seat at the table where decisions are made? Do I have influence or power? Can I affect how money is spent or am I just supporting the minutes?

“My voice counts as a woman,” says Sharon, “and I want it to be heard.”

To this end, Sharon currently supports and empowers many women through mentorship, challenging them on how they spend their time and go forward, encouraging them to ask themselves if they are making an impact. If they’re not, then they need to be confident enough to make positive changes.

“I would encourage people to speak up if they feel able,” says Sharon, “although I understand that if you are in a junior or middle-grade position, it can be really difficult to speak out. People like me have nothing to lose if someone doesn’t like what I say, but, if you want to make change, sometimes you have to say the things that people don’t necessarily want to hear.”

She continues: “Speaking out can be hard but if we simply stay silent nothing ever changes, so if you don’t feel you can speak out then find another woman who can. We have to keep pushing and supporting each other.”

Gender inequality

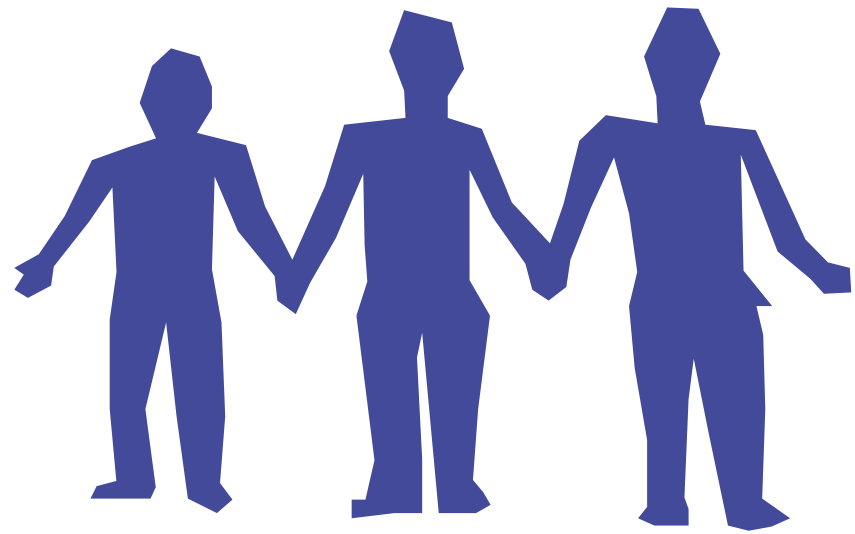
Sharon encourages women to challenge gender inequality directly. “If I went into a room now where I was the only woman,” she says, “the first thing I would say is ‘Where are the other women?’ because in this day and age, it’s not on to have that kind of situation.”

Sharon says it is vital that women in positions of leadership “push the door open for other women – you have to commit to supporting other women”.

She concludes: “You might think to yourself ‘I can’t do that’ but why not? Each of us is a highly intelligent person and you need to have the confidence

to say ‘I deserve to do something good here’. You need to make sure that what you are doing is really valuable and valued.”

“When there’s this fantastic sequencing network in place, it will feel like I’ve done my job, That’s a reward for me.”



Katie Normington

In Profile

With a dream to be a theatre director, Professor Katie Normington started her career teaching drama to 16-18 year olds. Now a Professor of Drama and Vice-Chancellor (VC), it was her love for teaching then, and an ambition to bring out the best in herself and others, that led Prof. Normington to think of teaching in a university setting.

While working full-time, Prof. Normington embarked on a PhD journey. She got her first teaching job at Greenwich University two-thirds of the way through her PhD and, upon completion, had an offer to become a lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London, in 1997. She worked there until her appointment as the Vice-Chancellor of De Montfort University (DMU) in January 2021.

Throughout her time at Royal Holloway, Katie initiated and chaired projects that impacted positively on students, women and the institution as a whole. She was Deputy Principal (Academic) and is an accomplished academic with several published books and many peer-reviewed articles within medieval English drama and contemporary theatre practice.

We caught up with the ever-inspirational new Vice-Chancellor to discuss her journey and her a new role at De Montfort University, Leicester.

You are the first woman in your family to go to university and now a Vice-Chancellor. How does that feel?

Yes, it does feel quite incredible. I grew up in a small town in the northeast of England. And I remember hearing, it must have been someone like Alan Bennett, talking about the sense that you grew up thinking, no-one from my street has ever gone on to achieve something that is well known. So, some of the feeling has to do with where I grew up.

Actually, I have realised my mum gets a bit cross when I start talking about being the first in the family to go to university because she points out she left school at 16, which was at the time quite normal. I should also say she went on to get an Open University degree in her middle years. Going to her graduation was one of my proudest moments. But, yeah, it wasn't expected that I would necessarily go to university. When I was at university, I never really thought that I would particularly stay in universities either. So, it wasn't as if there was a career trajectory. But I think it's a good lesson,



isn't it? That people can achieve things. I find it quite humbling that it has been possible.

When did you decide on a career in higher education?

When I left university, I really wanted to be a theatre director and did a master's in that, and then increasingly taught drama workshops. I began as a school instructor, and then got a job in a further education college, teaching BTEC and A-levels. The first few years were great because 16 to 18-year-olds, I think, are just a really lovely age to work with. They are trying to define themselves and find out what they want to do.

I loved teaching but the environment was not quite where I wanted to be; it wasn't bringing out the best in me and letting me bring out the best in others. I wanted to be teaching in a university setting and was interested in research too. So, I did a PhD whilst working full time. I suppose everyone has those moments in their lives when you look back and think, gosh, how did I ever manage that? Somehow it happened. I was probably two-thirds through the PhD when I got my first job at Greenwich University. That was a long time ago when you could get

jobs quite easily without PhDs. It was in a humanities school rather than a drama division department. But, I really wanted to be working in a drama department.

So, just as I submitted my PhD, I got the job at Royal Holloway. I stayed there for around 23 years. I progressed there from being a lecturer to a professoriate level and Deputy Principal (Academic) before I left for my new role at DMU.

What has been your motivation to continue to thrive in academia and to attain the Chief Executive position at DMU?

It has been a combination of saying yes to lots of opportunities, pushing doors open for myself and having the support of people around me. It is really important, in any career, to really get on with tasks and responsibilities and deliver results. And so, I think, quite quickly, I was able to, as a Faculty Dean, begin to get people to work differently and to achieve things that we hadn't achieved previously. The evidence was there that things were shifting and moving.

On opportunities ...

Then again, I think more of it was about making opportunities. Quite often, I would spot something that we weren't doing. For example, I started the Student First project, a project meant to help us improve our systems and processes to deliver outstanding student experiences that meet student expectations, at a department level, then through to faculty level. So, I guess some of that was pushing things and opening more doors of opportunities.

On support and mentoring ...

I got support to achieve my first leadership role. The Head of Department was away on sabbatical for a year and the department needed someone to cover this. A Dean who had spotted me in meetings said that she thought I was good, and I was encouraged to apply. That went really well. I received compliments for changing the culture, the tone and how we were approaching things during that year. I sort of progressed from there, applying for roles that came up. The Dean, was really important and, is still a very close friend now in her mid-70s. But I will still find her and say, "Oh, I'm thinking about this, what are your ideas on this?" I think having a

“ A Dean who had spotted me in meetings said that she thought I was good, and I was encouraged to apply. That went really well. I received compliments for changing the culture, the tone and how we were approaching things during that year. ”

mentor and someone who you really respect, who you can draw on for advice, has been really helpful.

It sounds like a smooth journey so far. What challenges have you had along the way?

I must point out that it has been an awful lot of hard work and not everything has gone right. I used to look at other people who are in really senior roles and think, "Oh, it's all right for them." "It's all gone right and they've got there", and now I realise when you look at all those people, it's far from the case. For them, some things will have not gone the way they wanted or there were the jobs or moments you didn't get the outcome you wanted, or someone else was asked to do something that you wanted to do. It was never all a bed of roses. There were moments where nothing was going anywhere, really, to be honest, as well.

There have been some things that did not go to plan. An interesting one was when I was at Royal Holloway. My new boss arrived and there were three of us who were Deans at that level. We worked really closely as Deans, it was great. Then, I think one of the Pro Vice-Chancellors (PVCs) left, so there were some bits of portfolio that needed sharing out and the other two Deans got bits of that and I didn't get anything at all. And I sort of thought, "Oh, crikey, okay." Right. Well, this hasn't gone very well. And then of course, people started saying to me, as well, it's a bit odd that they've been given these other roles, and you haven't got anything.

Later, I realised, what had happened is that the other two were much older and more experienced than I was, and my boss had decided to give the extra tasks to the most experienced people, rather than give them to the people who may well have the skills to do this. I guess it was a learning point for him. After that, he subsequently gave me a lot. But it was one of those moments where, it didn't really go how I wanted.

In your previous roles at Royal Holloway, you have looked at ways to improve student experience, staff engagement and led infrastructural projects. Which of these projects are you most proud of and why?

Definitely the women's project that I ran for five years. Most of the things I was involved with were as part of, or leading, a team. I am never very sure if I have made a particular

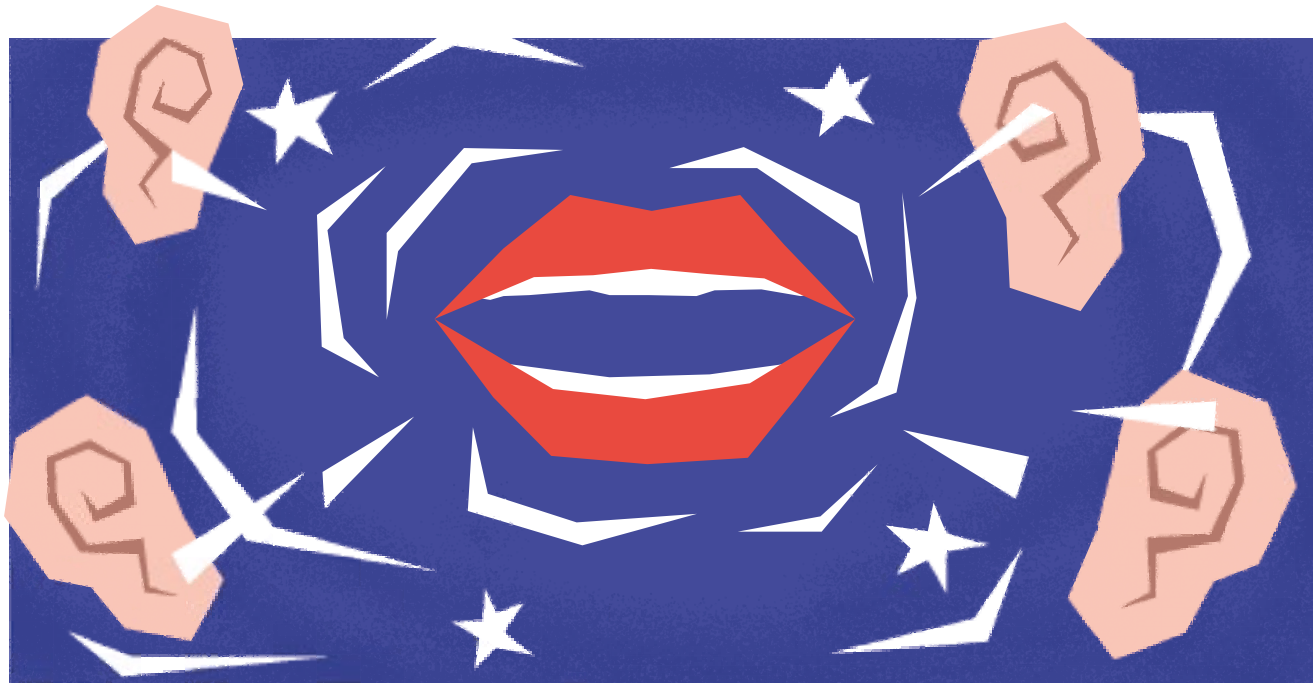
difference. But I developed the project for Readers and Senior Lecturers with our Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and we ran the workshops ourselves. Over that five-year period, our percentage of women professors went from 24% to 34%, and then those women started holding more leadership roles as Heads of Department and Heads of School. There was a visible difference. When I was leaving Royal Holloway, a bunch of flowers arrived at my home which read, 'From all the women at Royal Holloway who you have supported'. I was very moved by that.

You started your new role as Vice-Chancellor in the middle of a pandemic. We are currently witnessing a successful vaccination programme and a reduction in cases, and there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel for a 'new normal'. What challenges, lessons and strategies worked for you that could be implemented in running DMU in this 'new normal'?

Good question. Starting in a pandemic was not really the experience that I was hoping for. Certainly, a lot of running a university is obviously about working with people. You imagine, of course, your first meetings with your senior team. And when you imagine them, you would imagine yourself in a room with people. And so, it was quite a big shift to then think, "well, actually, it won't be like that, of course, will it?" There have been some positives. From the start, I came to Leicester onto campus three days a week. I was very keen that I did that. But of course, when I got here, it was pretty empty. Even so, it has given me a chance to say hello to a few people.

But I also think it was important to work around the limitations of the pandemic. And I thought, well actually, if the only kind of way I can communicate with people is through things like MS Teams, that's what I will do. I actually decided to set up 48 listening sessions with staff and student bodies. I probably would not have done that if it had all been in person. In the first two months, I have met over 1,000 staff. I query whether I would have done that if I'd been on campus, because I could not have physically got from place to place quite as quickly as I could. So, in that sense, I think it has helped to think about how you can reach groups of people and do that in ways which suits everyone as well. There were some downsides in terms of not really getting a feel for the place or what it is really like,





but there have also been upsides in working out where it is that technology enables you to come together more easily, with larger groups of people.

We have plenty to learn from the pandemic, don't we? Thinking about how people want to learn and work is at the centre of that. Above all, how do we offer a flexibility for students and staff now? Some things have worked for some people, while for others working and studying from home has not worked well. The pandemic has shown we need to make sure that we can offer a personalised and individual response to people.

As a believer of “the power of education to change people’s lives”, can you talk us through the role of universities in creating this impact?

My belief in this is very personal. My grandmother left school at 14 and my mother at 16. I was the first woman in my family to go to university and now I have become Vice-Chancellor. It is a reminder to me about the power of higher education to change people's lives, I have had the sort of opportunities that the women who went before me in my family never had. And it is just that same transformation that DMU gives to its students – many of our students are first in the family to go to university. My hope is always that through education people can go on to achieve things in their life they might not have previously thought possible.

On becoming Vice-Chancellor...

I have thought a lot about why I wanted to become a Vice-Chancellor and it is because it genuinely offers me a chance to make a real difference to others. Universities are increasingly having a difficult time. COVID-19 has been demanding and the changing government policy will make it even more so. As that became clear, I had to ask why I still wanted to become a VC knowing how hard it might be to lead a university over the next few years. But it went back to that chance to be able to make a difference to others, to students and to staff. It is why DMU feels like home for

me and it is all about the transformation that our teaching, research and the community of the campus can have for others and each other.

And on what to expect under your leadership ...

I am keen that we adopt a student-centred approach, stimulate research which is of real benefit to the community, and make DMU a key partner to the city. My style is very collaborative and I have already broadened the idea of leadership in the university to create an extended leadership team of the top 70 leaders so that we have more voices contributing to our direction. The strategy consultation has been about asking all staff and students to contribute to what they would like to see us doing. I am trying to create a place where we agree our direction and as a community, take the responsibility and pleasure for making that happen.

You are passionate about seeing other women succeed. Why is this important to you?

I do feel pretty passionate that as a woman, it is really our responsibility to make sure we leave other women in our trail. And, you know, I think that is why I was delighted when I left Royal Holloway. There were a lot more women professors than when I had first taken on a senior management role and a lot more heads of schools and departments who were women as well. I am passionate about it, and all equality of opportunity, because we should be enabling everyone to fulfil their potential – not just those who have a head start of some sort.

On good leadership ...

For me, a good leader is someone who enables other people. I mean, I could sit in my office here, trying to be a good leader. But if it's all down to me, I am not going to get very much done. I have actually got to empower the institution to be able to act and do things. And for me, certainly, that is good leadership. I see good leadership as

understanding the external environment and helping those in your organisation to develop a response to that, creating a vision of where we need to go from the ideas of staff and students in relation to the external environment.

But a good leader needs to find their style and their voice which I think is an interesting thing around women in leadership. I know when I was a junior member of the executive in my previous institution, I'd watch some of the men and think, I can't do that. And then I realised it wasn't that I could not do it, I could not do it the way they were doing it but I would do it in my own way. Finding your own style is important for a leader. But good leadership also needs more people to divest themselves of the stereotypical notion of what a good leader is – a lot of those stereotypes are very gendered.

What factors do you think are key when it comes to ensuring academics, both male and female, at all levels are engaged and represented within an organisation?

Well, I would say two things. The first is about structure and opportunity. I have spent a lot of time in the past creating better promotion schemes which are clearer in criteria and offering multiple options of those criteria. We need to make sure that the structures for representation are really achieving a proportionate coverage from a diverse range of academics. Secondly, we need to make sure the right encouragement and opportunities are there to support career development and progression. Some people, and often it is women, can end up with really bitty academic administration tasks which means it is hard to show leadership. I remember once talking to a Head of School and saying, well, you know, this person comes up every year and then they never seem to apply for promotion. What does their CV look like? What are they doing? And when they explained it to me, I asked, “Can you actually just give them a proper kind of leadership role if they're doing about six or seven things which are fragmented? Why don't you actually put them into a proper role.” They did that and a year later that person was promoted.

So, I think, there are those questions about how you are actually supporting a coherent development of someone's career.

Academia is widely considered to be especially patriarchal. What experiences have you had in this regard?

That is the whole thing about bias isn't it, it's often hidden. So, I'm not even sure when I might have been disadvantaged in some way. I remember when I was first made Dean and went into my first executive meeting. It was the old stereotype that there were two women in the room – me and the person taking the minutes. I had been used to a fairly matriarchal academic department and realised that I needed to work out how to be effective in the new environment I was in pretty quickly. I came straight out of that room and phoned Organisational Development (OD) to ask for a coach!

It is true that senior leaders and professors are disproportionately male (and white). On the other hand, I am very grateful to academia for being flexible enough

to enable me to pursue a family and a career. I remember when I met other new mothers when my children were small, many of them had had to give up their careers entirely. Many worked in the city then and it wasn't compatible with seeing their children when they were awake at all from what I could tell. Despite the issue of the university system still being patriarchal, I am pleased I entered it because it has been a lot more accommodating than many other professions.

You have a demanding role, and you sit on a number of committees and boards, what factors would you say are imperative in making life work for you?

It is finding what does work for you, isn't it? For me I don't really think the idea of work/life separation works. I very much take myself to work and I love doing most of the job, so I do work evenings and weekends. But I am quite good at self-regulating and sometimes at the weekend, the whole of my body will say 'no work today'. So I follow that and make sure I spend time with family and friends or just relaxing. I know I will work better the following day for having done that.

What advice would you give to your younger self at the start of your career?

I would have probably planned the way my career progression should go but it still worked out the way I wanted in the end. I think I would have told myself to have more confidence earlier on in my abilities.

Can you share your top five tips to thriving in academia?

1. Make sure you actively make opportunities for yourself – they don't always just come along, so you also need to be enabling them.
2. Be collegial! It's worth helping others out and hopefully you get the favour returned when you need it.
3. Focus! We all do a lot of things, some of them are diversion activities. Doing that book review, or going to another conference when you need to finish the journal articles. So don't be afraid to say no to some things.
4. Speak up! I remember at the beginning I used to make myself find something to say – and ensure it was a good quality remark – at least once in big meetings. If I didn't, very few women's voices would have been heard, and that way people knew me and that I had ideas.
5. Get a mentor – I've found these so helpful to my career. I couldn't have managed without the support of three or four people in my career along the way.

Righting the balance

We talk to university professors **Lisa and Tom Jackson** about their real-life experiences as academics, and whether they feel these have differed in any way because of their gender.

Both Lisa and Tom Jackson studied at Loughborough University, but neither of them had a grand masterplan for their future career paths.

Indeed, there wasn't much of a plan at all for Lisa, with her academic journey dictated mainly by the subjects she enjoyed, which informed her choices. While on her way towards becoming a teacher, Lisa was persuaded to take a PhD, which led to her becoming a recognised specialist in reliability assessment and the understanding of system failures.

For Tom, who took a computer science degree because he loved technology, the choice was between working in industry or moving into computer science research. He chose the latter after finding he had an affinity with solving problems and working with students, which in turn led to him becoming a lecturer.

"Fortunately, I was pretty good at the subjects I chose for my A levels and degree, but my career path was largely dictated by timely opportunities that suited my lifestyle and interests," Lisa explains. "I was fortunate to be successful in gaining a lectureship following a short research associate (RA) position. This was key, because it is very difficult to make the jump from RA into the academic lecturing world, especially these days."

"I've never been one for planning my journey in life, because so much can change in an instant," says Tom. "I prefer to take the approach where I decide if an opportunity is right for me at the time of the offering. Also, I believe that whatever I do should always have an element of fun in it, because life is short and being stuck in a job that isn't enjoyable is a waste of time."



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Nature rather than gender

Although both Lisa and Tom went on to become professors, their journeys differed. Tom puts this down to what he calls 'nature' rather than gender differences.

"Nature makes more of a difference than gender," says Tom. "Lisa had three major gaps in her career and trying to get back up to speed after those breaks is incredibly hard. However, having a supportive employer that understands the problem certainly helps and we have noticed those qualities at Loughborough University."

"I've been very fortunate and have worked with excellent colleagues at all levels who have helped me reach my position today," Tom continues. "I didn't have a set ambition of wanting to gain the title of professor, I just wanted to enjoy researching with my colleagues to see if we could make a difference to the world. Of course, the journey has been very hard work and has taken a lot of dedication. There have certainly been setbacks along the way but I think having the natural drive to make a difference has really helped a lot."

Lisa agrees with the difference in 'nature' that Tom identified. She says her journey to professorship happened because she worked hard through self-motivation, passion for her subject area, and a competitive spirit against her own high standards. A professorship was not 'on her radar', so her approach was markedly different to Tom's.

"Tom applied for his professorship early," says Lisa. "He did so through his own self-motivation and being more progressive with networks and grants – he's always been much better at talking with people than I am! I didn't feel that I was challenging a patriarchal environment at the beginning of my journey, I was simply self-driven to do the things I needed to do so I could better myself."

The importance of diversity and support

Lisa and Tom agree that they have benefited from a highly supportive and diverse structure within Loughborough University. Lisa says the support she has had from colleagues has in turn helped her to support others as they go through their own research journeys.

"I have definitely been fortunate in being guided and supported by group leaders," she says. "I have always felt respected as an individual and have never experienced any issues in terms of acceptance from the academic side of things."

Lisa says she never considered that taking maternity leave would affect her future, it was simply part of her career path. Her main concerns were how she could look after her own PhD students, how being away would impact on her colleagues' workloads, and how she would go about catching up with advances that had happened while she was on leave.

"Being away reduces your networking capabilities and the opportunities you have to disseminate work that supports your international profile," says Lisa. "There is also limited flexibility for you to regain your momentum and, when so much is metric driven, having a fluctuating journal metric count makes it difficult to compare yourself with other colleagues."

"It was only when applying for my professorship that I became more reflective of the impact of maternity leave, as well as restrictions when you are pregnant – such as travel – and what happens when you come back to work," she continues. "This part isn't really thought about and I believe better practices should be introduced to help people regain momentum when they're returning from maternity leave, such as reduced workload or less admin."

Lisa feels that time has probably made her more reflective on these issues, and she is now more aware of the challenges

“ While the situation is certainly improving – in terms of increased awareness of challenges across gender, ethnicity and other factors – I believe it still has a long way to go.”

women face in trying to combine a successful career with family life. She has known colleagues who have struggled with scheduling lectures that were inflexible to childcare and working patterns but she believes the pandemic has brought these issues sharply into focus.

"For many people in academia, such challenges may be a little remote from their own lives," says Lisa. "While the situation is certainly improving – in terms of increased awareness of challenges across gender, ethnicity and other factors – I believe it still has a long way to go."

Lisa believes that creating more opportunities to forge a genuinely level playing field will need to happen well in advance of people going to university, with the media and others needing to look very seriously at how they propagate unhelpful stereotypes.

Focus on how to help each other

Lisa is not convinced by the suggestion that women in academia can only get on if men change their attitudes and help their female colleagues to thrive. She believes that male colleagues already support female colleagues – and vice versa. However, she does admit that there may be "a small minority of males who aren't supportive, just as there is a small minority of women who aren't supportive of other women in academia."

"Rather than taking this outdated male/female approach, I believe the focus should be on how can we all help each other to thrive, regardless of gender, ethnicity and so on," Lisa adds. "I feel that education has a major role to play in giving everyone in society a much better understanding of the differences between people."

"The low numbers of women in academia compared to men can be addressed by schools changing attitudes around the acceptance of what women can do," she explains. "It will be far more productive if we can change attitudes that currently exist within society as a whole, rather than implementing positive discrimination schemes in terms of gender and diversity. I believe such practices can be harmful and even introduce inequality into the recruitment process."



Healthy competition

Within academia, there has always been competition in terms of securing funding or academics having their research published and acknowledged. However, Lisa and Tom say there is no competitiveness between themselves as a couple – and certainly not based on gender.

"My competitiveness is with myself and not with my colleagues or my husband," Lisa states. "I feel I am incredibly supportive of Tom's successes and that he is of mine. We are totally supportive of each other and will always try to help each other, which can mean giving a contradictory view if needed."

Lisa also reckons that if one of them is successful at work it can serve to spur the other on.

"We have different strengths and work well as a team," she says. "If anything, the other one's success can be a driving force to try that new route or to learn something new."

Finally, Tom admits to being fortunate that there is "a good level of diversity" where he works, which he believes is essential for balanced decision making.

"I would hope that universities would lead the way in showing how diversity can enrich the working experience," he says. "I know that isn't the priority at every university but hopefully by airing discussions like this around breaking down potentially patriarchal environments we can start to build better and fairer places in which to work."

Your story



To submit content to the website or to be featured in our print magazine, please send your copy and any attachments to:
hello@theacademicwoman.co.uk

All women in academia are welcome to share their stories, experiences and research by granting or requesting a feature to be done on them or writing as contributors. The lifestyle columns welcome contributions on health, wellness, relationships, fitness, fashion and beauty.

Visit theacademicwoman.co.uk for more details.

Book Club

The Academic Woman (TAW) invites you to join us to read a wide variety of genres and to engage with our community by sharing both your thoughts and experiences on our social media channels.

Our top three picks for this quarter, as we continue to celebrate the achievements of women are:



Girl, Woman, Other

Girl, Woman, Other is the eighth novel written by Bernardine Evaristo. Using a unique and appropriate writing style, this book takes an insightful look into the very different yet similar lives of twelve black women, each connected with each other in strange and beautiful ways whilst tackling relatable and meaningful struggles. Whether it may be a chapter on a wife or an academic, this book does not fail to make the reader question their identity and purpose, as well as what being a woman really means in the 21st century. Bernardine uses a wonderful range of writing techniques and exquisite language to create a masterpiece which I highly recommend.



Purple Hibiscus

In her debut novel, Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, tells us a story about family dysfunction, religious extremism, domestic violence, political outcomes and charity in post-colonial Nigeria. Told through the eyes of 15-year-old Kambili, the story revolves around the Achike household. Her father Eugene, a devoted Roman Catholic father, subjects his family through his own extreme views of religion and cultural alienation into abuse. We also see how his wife drew strength to end the violence at home. A brilliant piece of literature that narrates the impact and outcome of oppression on its recipients.

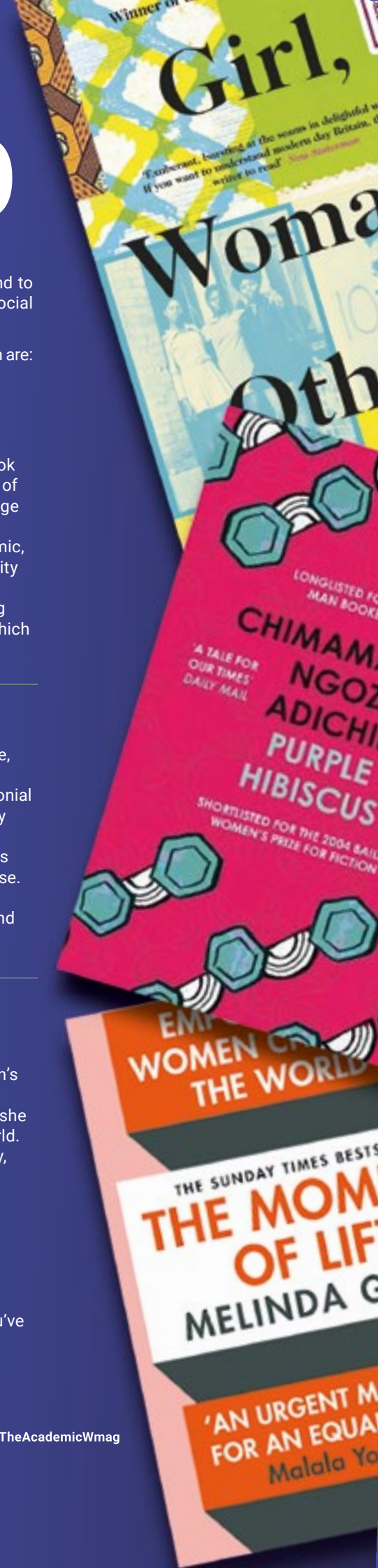


The Moment Of Lift

In a mixture of autobiography and compelling lessons learnt from working at Microsoft and all over the world about women's potential and power, Melinda Gates tells Melinda Gates tells inspirational stories to empower more women. These stories she tells reinforces that uplifting women ultimately uplifts our world. For anyone looking to change the world in their own small way, The Moment Of Lift is a starting point.

Visit our website to subscribe to our newsletter and engage with us on social media to help us pick the books to read together – and to discuss the narratives and themes you've enjoyed reading about.

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The academic nomad who averts disasters



Dr Ksenia Chmutina PhD MA FHEA is Senior Lecturer in Sustainable and Resilient Urbanism at Loughborough University, as well as Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Academic Deputy of the Secure and Resilient Societies Research Challenge. We spoke to her about her journey to becoming an expert in the highly specialised discipline of disaster risk reduction and management, and what lessons she had learnt along the way.

Urban vulnerability, sustainability and resilience are key areas of study for Dr Ksenia Chmutina, who has become an acknowledged and respected expert on how to manage disasters and minimise their risks while improving safety and security. These are not typically high-profile areas of academia but Ksenia's background – which she describes as 'transdisciplinary' – offers some clues as to why she chose to follow this path.

"I have a pretty unusual education background, and that is reflected in my research and in all the activities that I do," she explains. "My undergraduate degree, that I took in Russia, was in political science and international relations; I then moved to China where I did an MA in politics and communication; then I came to the UK to do a PhD in engineering. Although my PhD was about developing a policy analysis framework, very quickly I had to learn about building performance and other things that I had no idea even existed. It was extremely challenging but I learnt so much!"

Initially, Ksenia wasn't convinced that having a career in academia would enable her to use her skills to have any kind of 'impact' in the world, preferring to work instead for non-governmental organisations. However, she soon came to realise that by developing her research interests she could bring together political science and disaster risk reduction which would enable her to challenge how disasters are understood and, consequently, how the risks of disasters can be reduced.

Helping the marginalised

Ksenia is particularly passionate about the subject because she recognises how disasters disproportionately affect the most marginalised people. She believes this is because those who are in power tend to be driven by profiteering and serving the political, social and business elites. It angers Ksenia how disasters are often portrayed as 'unexpected shocks' that cause people to lose their livelihoods, shelter, family, sense of dignity, and the physical infrastructure that makes their daily lives possible. In fact, she says, for the marginalised a disaster is not a new, sudden, or unexpected danger; it is "a continuation of everyday harm inflicted on those relegated to the margins of society." Disasters don't simply bring about suffering, she asserts, they expose it.

"As an academic, it is my job to think critically and to challenge the 'normal' if this 'normal' merely re-establishes the status quo," says Ksenia. "What keeps me going is challenging the idea that trauma, suffering and displacement are unique to disaster events for those who have no voice in decision-making, no claim to an official place to live, a livelihood tied to meagre natural resources or a degraded environment. It is so important for me to challenge the narrative of disasters being sudden and 'natural'. If we don't do this, we will just keep 'blaming nature' and avoiding responsibility for failures of development."

Ksenia's research into disaster risk creation was able to expose how people who have been systemically oppressed and marginalised are affected by disasters the most. However, having the evidence wasn't enough – the arguments needed to be seen and heard. It was vital that the world understood how calling disasters 'natural'

hid the truth of how avoidable crises are often rooted in marginalisation, discrimination, and inequitable access to resources, knowledge and support. In short, Ksenia and her colleagues aim to demystify disaster scholarship and make it much more accessible. By engaging with academics, activists, artists and practitioners from around the world, she aims to show that "we cannot work in disciplinary silos if we are to reduce disaster risks."

Coming back inspired

As an 'academic nomad', Ksenia considers herself "really privileged" to have travelled around the world and met so many inspiring people. To her, it is essential that when innovative solutions are developed they need to involve the people who are affected by the problem. Local researchers need to be involved because personal bond, trust and respect are critical if the solutions are going to work and have a positive impact.

"Every time I go somewhere, I come back inspired, because I learn from every single person I meet," she says. "This learning doesn't come mechanically, it comes through a dialogue, a conversation. I hope this is reflected in my research and in all my work because I try to amplify the kind of voices that may not necessarily be heard. It's also important not to reinvent the wheel, so being able to learn from others is absolutely crucial."

As an academic exploring social aspects of disasters, the fight for equality is an integral part of Ksenia's world and she feels a certain level of optimism about the move towards greater equality within academia.

Change through listening

"I see a massive shift," she says. "We have started talking about equality and most importantly inequality, and there are so many amazing people who mobilise and gift their time to make a real difference. The kind of equality I hope for is multicultural, multilingual, polymorphic, pluralist, anti-hierarchical and anti-elitist. It is not equality based on the concept that 'we know what's good for everyone'."

However, Ksenia is acutely aware that much more still needs to be done, with recent figures showing that there are 35 black women in UK higher education but 12,860 white male professors. She is amazed that people have expressed shock when they've seen such figures.

"Why are people surprised when it's pretty obvious that our everyday lives are founded on white patriarchal and neoliberal values," asks Ksenia, "and academia is no exception?"

"This is what needs challenging and changing," she continues. "What I've learnt through my research and my equality, diversity and inclusion work is that a lot of changes come through listening and making sure that we amplify the voices of those who get left behind or are disadvantaged."

"I've also learnt that it's important to ensure everyone is involved because everyone's lived experience

matters. Inequality in academia can only be challenged if we work in solidarity, with individuals coming together. At an institutional level, we need to make sure that people are heard and respected and that this solidarity and care are recognised and rewarded."

Ksenia acknowledges that it is impossible to introduce 'equality' overnight. It will take years, she says, to encourage people to reflect on their own privileges and fragilities and to expose their own vulnerabilities. "We need to realise that we all need each other and we must all step out of our comfort zones and stop resisting change," she adds.

Learning important lessons

Ksenia says she has learnt several important lessons in her academic career, and she is happy to pass on two of the most important.

Firstly, it is okay to ask for help, she says. "Get a mentor, talk to senior colleagues, ask for feedback, discuss your challenges, failures and successes."

Secondly, it is also okay to stop. "Take a break, have weekends off and take holidays. It is perfectly fine not to check your e-mail while you're on holiday. It all sounds pretty obvious, but it took me a few years to realise that academic work never stops and that I may need to reduce my productivity sometimes if I still want to be good at what I'm doing."

Ksenia's other top tips for a fruitful and happy life in academia are:

- Make time for yourself to focus on what you want to do rather than what you need to do. "I spend one hour every morning, before I open my e-mails, reading something that is indirectly relevant to my research, and I cannot tell you how much I enjoy it."
- Acknowledge that you achieve something every day, even if it is the smallest thing.
- Create a 'nice e-mails' folder. "Every time there's a nice e-mail from a student or a colleague acknowledging my work, I file it into that folder. They work magic on really bad days!"
- Talk to comrades – sometimes even a social media post will do or a quick exchange of messages. "This is about a continuing dialogue on things that matter to all of us – giving back, supporting each other, having a quick moan, a place to be angry or to share something humorous."
- Finally, decide when to finish for the day and stick with that decision – "even if half the tasks you meant to do are still not completed."

“I’ve also learnt that it’s important to ensure everyone is involved because everyone’s lived experience matters.”

Take risks, make mistakes, say no if you need to

After a career in academia spanning more than 30 years, **Professor Sue Walker** has plenty of excellent advice to give to fellow women academics...



When we asked Professor Sue Walker, Director of the Design Star Doctoral Training Centre at the University of Reading, what advice she would give to women starting their careers in academia, she had plenty to say about cultivating a well-balanced mix of determination and independence, but also that it was important to not be afraid to ask for support when needed.

“It’s okay to say no,” she explains. “But make time to listen to others, collaborate with other women, and be stimulated by students.”

“It’s essential to protect valuable research time, keep some ‘head space’ for yourself and be prepared to practise resilience. At the same time, challenge yourself, be ambitious and creative, take risks, don’t be afraid to make mistakes, and definitely don’t be afraid to admit to them,” she continues. “It’s important to aim for leadership roles, because they’re exciting and present an excellent way to find out about yourself and others (and to help them). Equally important, however, is the need to support and respond to flexible ways of working – job shares, role shares, part-time, home working – that suit your lifestyle and mind set.”

Sue has spent all her academic life at Reading, where she studied typography and graphic communication, a new academic discipline that she helped to shape. The inter-disciplinary study covered linguistics, computer science and psychology alongside graphic design and art history. Working on practical design projects, she was intrigued and stimulated by archival material that helped to define this new subject.

The work was stimulating and intellectually challenging, and she became “hooked on academic life” when she was awarded a Major State Studentship for a PhD. Sue’s PhD was about prescription and practice, looking at the rules people follow when they organise their thoughts visually in handwriting, typing or print. She spent a lot of time in collections and archives studying business correspondence, typing manuals and style guides and visited primary schools across the UK and Europe to find out how children were taught about setting out their handwriting.

Moving into academia

Sue found herself beginning a career in academia when, towards the end of doing her PhD, she was offered one day a week teaching design practice to first-year students. She was able to continue with her research at the same time, combining academic life with having a family. Unusually for the era, Sue was offered flexible hours, working different proportions of part-time hours, but this ended when she was asked to become Head of Department, a role she felt needed her full-time attention.

The extensive research that Sue has carried out over the years has taken a number of different paths, but connecting them all is the relationship between language and its visual presentation through words and images.



Photo credit: the University of Reading (UOR)

“ Make time to listen to others, collaborate with other women, and be stimulated by students. ”

“Information design is about design for public good,” she says. “Making complex information clear with the needs of users in mind. It involves thinking about people and what kind of communication intervention can make a difference to their lives.”

One of Sue’s current projects concerns the design of instructions for carrying out COVID-19 tests, with the aim of making it easier for users to identify which parts of the test people make mistakes with. She is also working on projects about adolescent mental health which aim to draw attention to the role that design can play in disrupting conventional thinking. On top of all this, Sue is also working with historical material to find out how design was used in the past to inspire and help people. For example, as part of a project that has led to recommendations for typography in children’s reading books today, she has tracked changes in children’s reading books since the end of the nineteenth century.

“The importance of this work for me is that it is very much underpinned and influenced by what people need,” says Sue. “It shows how design can be used to intrigue and stimulate as well as make things easier to use and navigate.”

Another strand of her research is to raise the profile of and celebrate the role of women in design, including the work of Marie Neurath who is renowned for producing some highly acclaimed books for children.

Improving knowledge in the field

Sue hopes that her research has contributed to greater knowledge in her field, by drawing attention to the relationship of language and its visual organisation from theoretical and historical perspectives.

“The research helps to inform ways of looking at documents and how they are used,” she says. “My long-standing commitment to and advocacy for collections-based research has inspired brilliant PhD theses that have opened up new



Photo credit: the University of Reading (UOR)

perspectives on design for reading, as well as methods for engaging with materials and texts. My work has also shown that the application of design thinking can be a catalyst for innovation in cross-disciplinary projects.”

In addition to all of the above, Sue is currently working with the London-based applied design agency Design Science on a number of projects, which has involved operating within an all-female research team. We wondered how different this was from working with mixed research teams.

“It wasn’t a conscious decision to have an all-female team,” she says. “But walking into a room of women at our first project meeting was – we all realised – unusual and exciting.”

“It was different to other experiences I have had with mixed teams. Everyone contributed to discussions; no-one minded silence. The project plan was discussed, adapted and responsibilities were agreed in an efficient way. As the project progressed, commitments and deadlines were met, any problems and issues were aired and quickly resolved. It was altogether a most positive experience.”

Sue is also one of four female co-directors of one of Reading’s interdisciplinary research centres, the Centre for Book Cultures and Publishing (CBCP). This move was a strategic decision to demonstrate commitment to feminist management practice and the directors work together to share the group’s responsibilities and leadership, building on already successful collaborative working relationships.

A changing environment for women in academia

Sue admits that she initially found it challenging to deal with being undermined, patronised, talked over and let down by some male colleagues which used to be “very much the norm” in the academic world.

However, she has seen many positive changes for women in academia during her career, including more support for pregnancy, parenting and childcare.

“Flexible working and shared parental leave were unheard of when I was having my children in the 1980s,” Sue says. “On the other hand, I was never criticised or admonished for having a child or two in my office when they were off school.”

“In my leadership roles I have always encouraged women to find ways to work that suited them such as working part-time, delaying submission of the ‘big grant’ and encouraging them not to feel obliged to agree to another commitment, reassuring them that it’s OK to wait to go for promotion while their children are young.”

“The equality and diversity agenda has resulted in encouragement and support for women to consider leadership roles and there are many more opportunities to take on such roles,” Sue continues. “Offering and supporting leadership roles on a job-share basis is a good move to attract female applicants.”

Greatest achievement

When asked what she considers to be her greatest achievement in her career, Sue says without hesitation that it has been helping others – students or staff – to get to where they want to be.

“It’s a privilege to learn from and collaborate with passionate, engaged and stimulating people from all over the world and at different career stages,” she says. “I have also contributed to raising the profile of history, theory and practice of typography and graphic communication as a distinctive academic discipline, which was pioneered at Reading.”



Photo credit: the University of Reading (UOR)

References: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/design-research-for-testing-diagnostics/about-us/>

<https://www.marieneurath.org/>

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On my own terms

Initially thrown by the many limitations set by the pandemic, Dr Alexandra Reznik, a Tenured Professor at Chatham University says she has now found ways to enrich her soul while driving her career forward.

My end-of-first-year faculty evaluation comments were a wake-up call for me. “She should feel free to put some boundaries around her time to prevent burnout,” said one. Another encouraged me to assess and manage my time and energy. Wait, did this mean that I didn’t have to do it all? So as a professor, I could decide what I wanted to do instead of being guided by fear?

Before this, during my pre-pandemic first year, I found my footing as a

publishing scholar, ran the Women’s and Gender Studies programme, advised undergraduate students and taught. I joined every committee I was invited to and served in as many ways as I could within the institution to show that I really deserved to be there and took my position seriously.

Joy-driven and self-loving

Then the global pandemic happened and shifted everything in ways I could never have imagined. All the work I’d done to make myself indispensable throughout my first year suddenly felt futile. I still found myself watching every higher education and COVID-related seminar, staying in touch with my advisees to help them navigate the summer and the forthcoming year (whatever that would look like), and applying my energy to every possible initiative that my institution was leading over the summer.

Then I listened to Barbara K. Seeber and Maggie Berg’s *The Slow Professor – Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, and I realised that I needed to slow down in my professional and personal life, and reflect on whether the areas I was putting my energy into actually reflected my goals. I needed to shift from fear-driven, self-loathing graduate school mode into something else... something joy-driven and self-loving.

I had certainly found joy in the pre-pandemic year as a new professor connecting with others in my classes, in my department, in the community and with social justice organisations. Now I needed to figure out how to find that same joy in the virtual space, while also enabling students to bring

their voices and interests to the table in all sorts of different ways.

Virtual meetings with community stakeholders and ‘coffee breaks’ with colleagues speckled my calendar but I was still missing something. What were my goals again? The grand ideas I had in my first month as a professor suddenly seemed enormous compared to the goals of staying healthy physically and mentally... which the pandemic had rendered nearly impossible.

Baby steps to a ‘new normal’

Thankfully, by April 2021 I was able to take a big breath. The school year was finished and I still had my job. Vaccinations allowed for baby steps into a ‘new normal’ and I had space to think about how to enrich my soul and not just my body.

In conversations with colleagues we had the space to share how we were struggling with similar issues. These included, but were not limited to, video-meetings burnout, social justice burnout and institutional politics burnout.

It has been incredibly empowering to reflect with colleagues how to move forward in virtual classrooms and meetings, in isolation at home in our slippers, while hoping that our institution will survive the waves of emotional and financial distress and be there for another academic year.

I have come to the conclusion that joy and self-love will drive my third year of professorship. I now understand that I don’t have to do it all, but I will... and it will be on my terms.

Writing is counting snails and dancing

Dr Cathy Mazak explores the idea of where the writing process begins, and how we can all tap into feelings of positivity and enthusiasm, for greater momentum in penning our next academic paper.



What counts as writing? Is it more than putting words on a page?

The simple answer is: yes.

As academia pulls us in a thousand directions, we spend so much time thinking “I should be writing” that we forget what writing really is. Indeed, we barely notice that we are writing all the time in subtle but necessary ways.

Academics love to talk about their ‘pipelines’. There’s a lot of stress surrounding the issue and it seems that everyone imagines everyone else has some kind of magical way to manage their pipeline that enables publications to flow out with ease every year.

But we’ve been thinking about our publication pipelines all wrong. We’ve been focussed on the wrong end.

Where does writing start?

When we plan out our pipelines, what we really need to be asking ourselves is: What are all the things that have to happen before I can put (virtual) pen to paper? Before worrying about the number of words per day and managing pomodoros, we need to think about where writing really starts. We need to think of all the ways that writing happens before we even think of creating a ‘new document’.

The more academics I talk to about writing, the more I realise how varied the activities are that make up our writing. For a botanist, for example, writing begins with growing plants. For a historian, writing could start with a trip to an archive hidden deep on a Caribbean island. For an anthropologist, it may begin with volunteering for a community health organisation.

For one friend of mine, writing starts with counting snails. Her research identifies new species of snails in soil samples and no writing would happen without her first sifting the dirt and counting the snails. For another friend,

writing commences with a performance – blocking a scene is writing; choreographing movement is writing.

The point is, it is important to re-consider what counts as writing. By doing this, we can see that we are really writing much more than we think we are. We are making progress by counting snails or growing plants or dancing and that progress feels good. Acknowledging the progress and the forward movement in a writing project helps us to cultivate positive feelings about our writing.

Rediscover the joy

Creating this positivity around writing is essential if we are to maintain an academic writing practice. Although there is considerable external pressure to publish, our internal spark to write is regularly stamped out by academia. This pressure to publish or perish sucks all the joy out of the writing process. What used to be a creative outlet for many of us (think of your first grade, self-crafting a story in the lined spaces under a colourful crayon-drawn picture) has become a stressful, horrible experience, stripped of all enjoyment and ease.

For many, academic writing may not feel creative in the way that creating a child’s story did, but it is most certainly a creative act to write and publish academic work. Also, because writing is creative, it can be dangerous. We experience this danger intensely in academia, where we release our carefully crafted work into the world only to have it torn to shreds by reviewers. It hurts to have our writing criticised and so our writing begins to hurt.

From there, it can be a dark spiral towards self-doubt, and writing does not respond well to self-doubt. It does not thrive in negativity. It withers and dies under guilt and overwhelm.

That’s why creating a positive relationship with writing is so important for us as academics. However, unlike when we’re in first grade, these positive feelings don’t necessarily happen naturally. We often need to make a deliberate effort to create them.

So it all starts with the pipeline

Try this exercise: take a piece of paper and a pen and write out your pipeline. Start at the beginning, the true beginning, so maybe you’ll write ‘get idea’ or ‘spark occurs’. Then write down all the things that must happen between that moment and starting to write the first draft. For some of you, getting a grant is not optional. That means that the grant process needs to be on this list. For others,



external funding is nice but not absolutely necessary, and that’s fine, too. The purpose is to articulate your list.

Now take a look at your list. All of this is writing. All of this ‘counts’.

Baby steps are still steps

The path to creating positive feelings about your academic writing is full of baby steps and mind tricks. But it is essential to take that path. If every time you open your computer to write you feel dread, then writing will continue to fall to the bottom of your list. If you can work instead to create feelings of excitement and flow about writing, you will want to do it and your writing practice will sustain itself.

If we are to use our academic work to create the changes we want to see in our fields and in the world, then we need to cultivate this positive relationship with writing. It is essential that writing feels good, and that you acknowledge forward movement towards your goals. People need to hear what you have to say, and creating a positive relationship with writing will help you to say it.

For these reasons alone we need to reimagine what counts as writing. Writing is not just words on the page – it is counting snails; it is dancing.

Fit for purpose

We speak to **Dr Laura Miele PhD**, Adjunct Professor at Southern New Hampshire University about following her heart into academia, the importance of wellness in mind and body, and strategies for dealing with a pandemic-related slump.

As a sport, fitness and recreation expert for more than 30 years, Adjunct Professor Laura Miele PhD knows everything there is to know about keeping fit, taking care of our bodies and dealing with injuries, as well as safety and risk assessment. With experience as a personal trainer, group instructor and expert witness in litigation cases, Laura regularly gives talks as a sport psychology consultant and is author of the recently published book *Psyche of the Injured Athlete*.

Laura has reached the top in the sports and recreation industry because she simply loves the subject. Growing up in Queens, New York, she developed a passion for basketball because it gave her a much-needed outlet and a feeling of euphoria whenever she played. Volleyball and softball also enabled the extremely competitive Laura to "escape a little bit" from the world and to be in a "zone" that she loved and craved.

Basketball was her real passion and she became a top player in high school and college. It was only natural that she would move into teaching the sport and passing her expertise on to others.

"I grew up kind of tough, and it was important to be a part of sports on so many different levels," Laura explains. "It was like an onion for me; peeling so many different layers off is what led to my future as a coach. As a little girl, I always loved to coach and teach. I started coaching softball in high school and then basketball but I got injured in college when I was about 20. So I peeled the layers back off the onion and became a teacher, a coach and a professor, which led ultimately to what I'm doing now."

“ It was like an onion for me; peeling so many different layers off is what led to my future as a coach. ”

Mental well-being and the pandemic

It has always been important to Laura, when looking at health and fitness, that the focus is not solely on remaining physically active. Keeping mentally agile is equally as important and this has been underlined for many during the period of the pandemic.

"I think it's extremely important that we have to be mentally, not just physically, healthy because without one, you really don't have the other," she says. "If you feel mentally healthy yet you feel sluggish are you really feeling mentally healthy? We know the saying 'you are what you eat' but I believe we are also what we ingest in our minds – what we watch, what we read, and how we deal with it all, sometimes subconsciously. We don't realise that we absorb negativity and this affects our mental well-being."

Laura contends that physical and mental wellness need to work together, we need to be taking in positive thoughts as well as working with our bodies to be active. If we don't, blood and oxygen won't flow properly through our bodies and we won't feel well on so many different levels.

The pandemic has taken its toll on people who would normally frequent gyms and love to keep fit but Laura has managed to work around this by walking more, taking to her bike, and using weights at home. However, she admits that it is much harder to be motivated when at home and she has some tips.

"What I suggest to people is to find your outlet, such as your favourite music," she advises. "Or exercise with a friend who you can engage with. You need to be able to talk as you walk, you have to do something, or you can become stir-crazy."

Loneliness when exercising is a serious issue and Laura has found that people have experienced a lot of "situational depression". They have stagnated so much that they've effectively become frightened to go back to the gym.

"So if the weather's nice, get on a bike or find a park where you can walk," she says. "I do a little dog walk in a park that's not far from my house and there's hardly anyone there. I bought these big headphones and it's really been an outlet for me, I've really started to get motivated lately."



"I gained a lot of weight during the pandemic – I think a lot of people did – and it started making me really sad," Laura continues. "I started feeling bad about myself because I had stagnated. And like I said, when you're body's not feeling well then mentally you're not feeling well. You've got to find something that at least gets you moving. Walk a block then try two blocks the next day and set some kind of incremental goals for yourself that you can tick off. It's exciting when you see that checklist getting filled up, you can see how far you've gone and it gives you something to strive for."

Inspired to move into academia

Laura moved into academia because she loves working with students, she loves to share her knowledge and expertise and gets a buzz out of seeing students "propel themselves on to something else." As a professor at Ohio University Southern and in her teaching role at a local community college, Laura believes it's important for a tutor to share their experiences because students get so much more than a textbook can provide.

She was herself inspired by Dr Norma Richardson, who climbed Mount Everest and met the Dalai Lama while in her late 70s. Dr Richardson was Laura's adjunct professor while studying for her master's degree.

"She talked about all these amazing things that she did," says Laura, "all her conquests in life, and for a woman to achieve what she achieved was incredible. I wanted to be just like her, I wanted to be a professor and I wanted one day to be able to speak about my experiences and be so passionate like she was. That one class changed my life when it came to wanting to be an educator, so much that I know my life would never be completely fulfilled if I wasn't still part of academia in some capacity. I still do research because I can never get enough knowledge and I absolutely love it."

Laura certainly keeps her own mind active. As well as being a speaker and an author, she shares her expertise through one of her businesses called Mind Over Body Athletics and she writes a 'Mind Over Body' blog on the Psychology Today website. Her other business, Miele Forensic Consulting, sees her writing about risk management in sport and fitness and recreation, advising people how to avoid injury and helping those who have been injured. Her most recent book, *Psyche of the Injured Athlete*, looks at what happens when an athlete's career ends abruptly either from retirement or injury, focusing on the resulting emotional and psychological harm.

Being a single parent prevented Laura from moving straight into full-time academia, which is why she went down the business route. But she still hankers for being "a full-time professor somewhere."

“...and for a woman to achieve what she achieved was incredible. I wanted to be just like her, I wanted to be a professor.”

"I haven't given that up yet," she says. "It's something I've always wanted to do. It's just that life kind of got in the way. Also, the reason I started my business was because I loved training athletes, I loved working with them. I trained them in basketball, in speed and agility, and I did a lot of injury prevention clinics for baseball players, football players, equestrians, and all types of different athletes, including helping female athletes avoid knee injuries."

Always follow your heart

We asked Laura what advice she would give to any young woman interested in moving into academia, "Always follow your passion," she says. "Do what you love to do so that when you do teach, as a professor, you're able to demonstrate that passion. Make sure that when you go into academia you follow your heart to what you want to research and have published. Don't decide to teach something just because you're finally getting some kind of job in academia."

"If it isn't exactly what you want to do then you won't have that passion and the students will feel it. I truly believe that if we don't follow our heart, when we work with students they can sense it almost like a dog can sense fear. They can sense that your heart's not in it, and that means you're providing them a disservice."

Getting closer to nature

Sarah Wolfenden BA (Hons), MA, MCLIP, SFHEA explains the importance of being connected with the natural world, and offers tips on how we can all reduce our stress levels.

The recent Mental Health Awareness Month focused on nature. Institutions such as Mind, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and Action for Happiness encouraged us all to go out and gaze up at trees. Pictures of late blooming bluebells were posted on social media feeds. I wonder, though, how many of us will still be engaging in these activities now the awareness month has passed?

In 1973, social psychologist Erich Fromm coined the word 'biophilia' and described it as "the passionate love of life and all that is alive." Then the entomologist Edward O. Wilson came up with 'the biophilia hypothesis', arguing that humans were innately connected to the natural world – not only out of fear (to recognise dangers and ensure survival) but also for personal fulfilment. Florence Williams, in her 2017 book *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier and More Creative*, says the biophilia hypothesis "posits that peaceful or nurturing elements of nature helped us to regain equanimity, cognitive clarity, empathy and hope." We could certainly all do with those in our lives.

There is plenty of research available to show how being close to nature, whether in woodland, by the sea or in the open countryside, is good for us. These environments can provide clarity and focus and reduce feelings of overwhelm and anxiety. We are also starting to hear about larger initiatives such as forest bathing (shinrin-yoku) in Japan, garden urban developments in Singapore, and the benefits of listening to birdsong in the UK. At the same time, there is a slow but significant increase in outdoor coaching, something I and my clients particularly enjoy because it gets us away from our physical workspaces.

Here are five handy tips, that I've taken from my reading on this subject, which you may wish to consider:



Location

If you can, situate your desk near a window overlooking a green space. Psychologist Roger Ulrich's research in the late 1980s showed that people healed more quickly from illness when they were able to look out over open natural spaces rather than urban environments. This was said to be due to the increase in relaxation levels and the neurotransmitter serotonin. If it's not possible to do this, try using a favourite photograph of the outdoors as your Zoom backdrop or mobile screensaver.

Go for a walk

Next time you feel overwhelmed, try putting on your shoes and going for a walk. It's amazing what a change of scenery, even if it is just a turn around the garden, can do. Notice how you feel as you step out and then again when you step back in. If you are going further afield than your back garden, be aware of how spaces can make you feel. Woods can make you feel calmer and more introspective, wide open fields can increase feelings of exhilaration and vulnerability. We all benefit from looking at trees, green spaces and open water so, if you can, mix it up or choose a place which has all three.



Do gardening in your lunch break

Spend 10 minutes gardening in your lunchbreak. A lot can be done in 10 minutes – you can plant a few seeds or clear a few weeds. If you don't have a garden, try planting some herbs on your windowsill. Basil is a great one for this and it tastes great in meals. Lavender and rosemary are also recommended.

Spruce up your home with plants and flowers

Include plants and flowers in your home's décor. This is especially important if you find it difficult to leave the house. Bringing nature in, and especially scents such as lavender and rosemary, has been shown to help in reducing levels of the stress hormone cortisol.



Do a complete '54321' activity

Step outside and complete the '54321' activity. This is a pleasant and straightforward task that can help with feelings of anxiety and overwhelm because it brings us immediately back to the present by focussing on all our senses. So take a few deep breaths then identify five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can feel, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.



I hope that some of these ideas will help you to stay connected with nature. In the meantime, I'll leave you with this quotation from Romantic poet William Wordsworth to ponder:

"To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

Seeking happiness? Jot down a 'joy list'



Emily Milsom

Don't wait until your later years to pinpoint things that will make your life better, says **Emily Milsom**. Draw up your 'joy list' and start living life now!

Many academic women have career hopes and dreams relating to where they wish to get published, the research they hope to get funded or even the students they wish to mentor.

However, many also have full lives in terms of teaching and researching, parenting and personal relationships, which leaves very little time for nourishing the self and for experiencing the things that make them happy. The result can be a life of almost-regrets – rueing all the experiences that they never quite got around to having during their formative years.

So it's time for a little reframe – forget the bucket list and create a 'joy list' instead.

What is a 'joy list'?

A bucket list, if you aren't fully up to speed, is essentially a list of things you want to do before you 'kick the bucket'

(pass away). It is a list of goals set around the things you want to achieve. Many people don't make a bucket list until their later years, which often comes about from a heightened awareness of how many years have already passed without accomplishing those things that are buried in their hearts.

Some people make bucket lists designed solely to further their achievements. However, according to research from Berkeley Wellness (the leading online resource for evidence-based wellness information; a collaboration between the School of Public Health at UC Berkeley and a team of writers and editors), true happiness comes from "propensity to feel positive emotions, capacity to recover from negative emotions quickly, and holding a sense of purpose... as well as the ability to connect with others, have meaningful relationships and build community."

So if these are the ingredients for a well-lived, purposeful life, shouldn't a list designed to promote happiness

contain things that can create these types of emotions and connections? A joy list is a living, breathing inventory full of your deepest desires, spontaneous opportunities and – most of all – the experiences and feelings you shouldn't wait for your later years to chase after.

Areas of joy

A joy list is a great tool for ensuring academic women don't miss out on the things that make them truly happy – and that includes career aspirations. Drawing up a wish-list is an exercise in balance, ensuring all interests, needs and passions are accounted for.

There are a few areas to consider when drafting up a list of things you'd love to do. They include but are not limited to:

- **Academia** – publication, tenure, speak at a conference, become a Head of Department
- **Events** – music, theatre, art exhibitions, the Olympics
- **Travel** – countries, capitals, natural wonders, live in another country
- **Food** – fine dining, home baking, foreign cuisines
- **Hobbies** – paddle boarding, singing, macrame
- **Experiences** – tea masterclass, weightlessness, be an extra in a movie
- **Feelings** – get someone to smile, dance like nobody's watching, make grandparents feel appreciated
- **Community** – volunteer, fundraise, chat to a stranger
- **Relationships** – call an old friend, cook dinner for a sibling, share your favourite memories with your parents
- **Fun/silly** – crash a party, eat raw cookie dough, use a personal shopper

Create your joy list

When creating your category lists, it's all about digging deep into all your wants, needs and desires. This isn't the time to think about feasibility or even how practical it sounds. For each section you want to write down around 20 to 25 items, from these lists you can then pull out your top 100. Here's a tip: make sure you've got a good mix between achievements and feelings.

Always remember that these kinds of lists aren't set in stone and over time you may wish to remove or edit items. Above all, keep the list as true to you as possible.

A joy challenge

The final step of creating any joy list is to start ticking things off. The immediate challenge to you is to tick one thing off your joy list in the first week, and set yourself an intention to keep coming back to it wherever it is (ideally, your list will always be in plain sight).

One final piece of advice: don't wait until you've run out of time. Live in the now and use your joy list to help.



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