

# How higher education bodies can inspire young women to pursue careers in STEM

Universities in Ireland must commit to advancing gender equality in their STEM programmes. Gender-supportive initiatives and identifiable role models are key in achieving this.



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**H**igher education bodies must continually strive to review and improve working practices in relation to gender balance, and to improve career progression and satisfaction for all our staff.

The expanded Athena SWAN Charter is about gender equality in all disciplines and support functions. It is about inclusivity and intersectionality, ensuring we address how various forms of inequalities are interconnected for minority women and other underrepresented groups. The Department of Mathematics and Statistics at the University of Limerick (UL) is very proud to be one of the first departments in Ireland to obtain this award.

### Reach out to young women at second-level education

Gender equality initiatives can support women into STEM programmes and help to maintain gender balance across the entire academic career spectrum. So it is vital to focus on reaching out to young women in second-level education, with the aim of encouraging them into STEM disciplines at third level, which

UL strives to do.

Initiatives such as the national 'I Wish Campus Week' aim to inspire, encourage and motivate female second-level school students to pursue careers in STEM. Led by Mary Moloney and Norma Welch, Cork Institute of Technology have organised these successful events since 2015.

The programme includes workshops, interactive demonstrations, panel sessions and industry site visits to allow second-year students to immerse themselves in 'all that is great about STEM'.

### Inspire young women with females they can look up to

Strong female role models are key during such activities, and should be visible throughout, from undergraduate students up to senior academic staff. The aim is to provide students with an in-depth insight into the daily lives of STEM professionals and graduates, so students can imagine what real life in a STEM career could look like for them.

These events have been very successful, and it is delightful to see them both over-subscribed

and receiving extremely positive feedback: "It really opened my eyes and made me think about the future," said one participant.

As well as our own, successful I Wish campus week, we are hugely proud to see that the model has been adopted by three other higher education institutions to date, and we look forward to many more actively participating in the near future.

The SALI (Senior Academic Leadership Initiative) is aimed at supporting higher education institutions in achieving gender and diversity goals at a staff level, supporting the drive for broader representation. The Department of Mathematics and Statistics was successful in securing funding for a female Professor under the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) which is aimed at supporting higher education institutions in achieving gender balance at the most senior levels. The greater the diversity across the staff team, the wider the appeal to aspiring students, who seek role models with whom they can identify.



UL has placed gender equality at the fore for many years. The senior leadership at UL represents significant gender equality with five of an eight-member executive committee being female. For the second time in its history, UL has a female chancellor and both of UL's two vice presidents are female. 60% of UL's faculty deans are women, 41% of heads of department are women.

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