

# Exploring EQUALITY in education

Tucked away in scenic Semenyih, the University of Nottingham Malaysia walks the talk when it comes to gender equality

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Visitors to the campus are often struck by how well-kept its buildings and environs are

One of the first things that strikes visitors to the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC) is how new everything looks, even though it has operated from its current location for the better part of a decade. It is a visual indicator of the institution's innovative approach to education, which is reflected in everything from its perspectives on research and rankings to its female faculty and students.

"We're very proud that we've had two international 'firsts' over the past year, as we were the first international institution to receive the Athena Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN) Bronze Award for our Faculty of Science from the UK's Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), which recognises efforts in gender equality, and also the first institution outside the UK to receive accreditation from the British Psychological Society (BPS) for our School of Psychology's undergraduate programmes," says UNMC Faculty of Science dean Claire O'Malley.

UNMC's uncompromising policy towards the maintenance of its buildings and environs stands in stark contrast to the conditions found in many developments in the country, whether public or private, some of which were founded much more recently than the Semenyih campus of this Nottinghamshire-based institution.

In many ways, its fresh facades and features are a concrete testament to UNMC's departure from conventions that have become the norm in Malaysia's educational landscape, challenging learners and lecturers alike to rethink the way they work, study and interact with each other, whether male or female.

"We have an institution-wide grouping called Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (WinSET), which discusses gender equality issues within the university and beyond while incorporating a variety of professional development programmes," says UNMC provost and CEO Christine Ennew.

"What's interesting is that when we brought WinSET over from the UK, the female staff leading the initiative here were absolutely adamant that it was not to be open to just women. It had to be for both women and men, because otherwise that would defeat the purpose of the movement."

WinSET and other projects like it are a breath of fresh air in an industry where women continue to be under-represented in senior management roles, despite greater or equal representation in terms of both

UNMC received the Athena SWAN Bronze Award, recognising its efforts towards promoting gender equality in STEMM fields





Ennew believes in the cultivation of good citizens in education, who can go on to become pillars of their communities



O'Malley stresses the need for self-confidence and initiative among women exploring careers in academia

student intake and academic staff. This disparity is attributed to a number of social factors, with the related “leaky pipeline” effect notable among these.

In simple terms, the theory accounts for the increasing tendency among married women to leave vocations in education as academic careers progress, from securing a tenure track position to achieving associate and full professor status. Family is the primary motivator cited for the effect, often coinciding with the onset of child-rearing responsibilities. This is especially prevalent in life science courses, which can involve experimental research that requires hands-on monitoring every four hours, round the clock.

“If an institutional infrastructure is such that there aren’t family-friendly policies, such as flexible hours of work, or maternity and paternity leave benefits, it

makes it harder not just to maintain a position in the field, but even to put in the hours that it takes to get a satisfactory research track record,” says O’Malley.

Founded in September 2014 and chaired by UNMC Faculty of Engineering Prof Ir Mei Fong Chong, the WinSET initiative seeks to address this loss of skilled personnel by spreading awareness about the benefits of gender diversity in the academic and administrative context.

It has already attracted healthy participation from both male and female staff, drawn by its vision of assisting individuals within the institution to develop their management and leadership skills while inculcating a healthy respect and knowledge of the significance of gender equality through a range of workshops, talks, seminars and mentorship programmes.



**“To women just setting out for careers in academia, I think it is important to believe in yourself. It’s perfectly possible, but you need to have self-confidence. If you’re ever unsure, you need to ask for help, don’t just wait to be asked”**

— Claire O’Malley, dean of UNMC Faculty of Science

Its launch was closely followed by UNMC’s Athena SWAN accolade in November. Awarded to its Faculty of Science (FoS), the accolade also reflects the progressive policies in place within the institution as a whole, as well as its systematic commitment to monitoring and advancing gender equality through the recruitment, retention and promotion of women, particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM).

As seen in its BPS accreditation, the campus excels in academic accomplishment as well, utilising personal tutorial systems and small-group teaching methods to intensively groom students into delivering their best. Though curriculums are based on UNMC’s UK counterparts, care is taken to localise course contents to Malaysian needs.

“Research is seen as part and parcel of learning here, even at the undergraduate phase, and we engage students in it from Day 1. Malaysian students are committed to doing well, and are ambitious, but there isn’t that culture of back-and-forth with the teacher that you find elsewhere. We add value by encouraging a mind-set conducive towards critical thinking,” says O’Malley.

O’Malley and Ennew represent the potential of UNMC’s approach to gender equality and academic excellence, earning their current posts through 25 and 28 years of experience in the industry respectively. O’Malley’s current research focus is on psychological theories and methods in the design and use of computer-supported collaborative learning environments, while Ennew specialises in services marketing and management as they relate to trust, service quality and customer relationships.

They are also representative of the institution’s recruitment strategy, which emphasises international experience and backgrounds among its faculty to promote intercultural and interdisciplinary interactions between students and staff, facilitating a broad spectrum of research possibilities for graduates. At the same time, staff-to-student ratios are maintained at optimal levels, to ensure quality instruction.

“We now have about 76 academic staff within the FoS, with an average faculty-to-student ratio of about 16:1, and 18:1 as the highest. This allows us to give more personalised instruction, which was one of the criteria the BPS examined in evaluating the context for psychology students here,” says O’Malley.

While UNMC pays lip service to the statistics measured by the international ranking systems employed by specialists such as Quacquerelli Symonds and Times Higher Education, it places greater value on the well-rounded growth of its students, particularly in the soft skills, which are often as critical as technical know-how in professional or administrative roles.

“Things like citations undoubtedly matter, but we don’t set hard targets around those areas, because it tends to distort behaviour. What we want people to do is publish research of high quality in the best outlets that they can, with the focus on quality. Citations can be a long game and can be misleading, so we prefer a more developmental approach,” says Ennew.

Towards this end, Ennew encourages the cultivation of “good citizens” who can go beyond purely academic achievements to become pillars of their respective communities, regardless of whether they are male or female. Examples include UNMC alumnus Molly Fong, a 2012 MBA graduate and current CEO of Body Shop Malaysia, who has also contributed significantly towards environmental conservation and domestic violence awareness efforts in the country.

“To women just setting out for careers in academia, I think it is important to believe in yourself. It’s perfectly possible, but you need to have self-confidence. If you’re ever unsure, you need to ask for help, don’t just wait to be asked. You have just as much right and chance of getting there as anybody else,” concludes O’Malley. ■