

**Report on a questionnaire to assess the demand for a national  
network of women in science, engineering and technology**

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## ***Executive Summary***

### ***Report on a questionnaire to assess the demand for a national network of women in science, engineering and technology***

The survey arose from the response of a small group of women scientists and engineers to the fact that the national Association for Women in Science and Engineering, AWiSE, had entered a period of dormancy. Although there are a number of regional networks, subject specific networks, and networks catering for specific interest groups such as returners there is no national network covering women in all areas of science, engineering and technology (SET). A national network covering all disciplines would give women access to a greater range of experience, give greater credibility to statements on policy, and enable regional groups to take advantage of economies of scale in administration. The group decided that the first step in reviving a national network for women in science would be to assess the demand for such a network and to ascertain what functions such a network would serve. Funding for the survey was provided by the UKRC for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology.

The questionnaire was designed by a group of women working in science from different backgrounds including academia and business and was implemented in an online format. The weblink for the survey was distributed by email through the lists of existing women's organisations as well as some professional societies.

There were 650 responses which were fairly typical of women qualified in SET by subject, age and location. Women were, on the whole, supportive of the idea of a national network of women in science, engineering and technology. 95 % of respondents would join the network, 80 % would pay at least £20. Four of the eleven suggested objectives were clearly and consistently rated the highest overall.

1. Supporting participation of girls in science, engineering and technology.
2. Provision and promotion of career and personal development training.
3. Meeting other women scientists, engineers and technologists, enabling women to share experiences and knowledge, for example, strategies for work-life balance or coping in a male-dominated environment.
4. An independent, national voice for women in science, engineering or technology with which to influence public policy, employers and public perceptions.

How would a national network benefit individual women? There was a strong desire for networking opportunities locally and that there should be some form of overarching national organisation. This organisation could help to share information on gender specific issues, work-life balance issues, job opportunities, career advice, development and training.

What would this network do that existing organisations did not? There is a clear need for a stronger voice with which to influence public perception and employers' and public policy. Also important was the opportunity to meet other women in their locality, a well-designed website and consolidation of existing networks.

The challenge now is to develop a structure for such a national network that is sustainable, both financially and in the personnel involved, and that builds upon, complements and enhances existing networking activities.

# **Report on a questionnaire to assess the demand for a national network of women in science, engineering and technology.**

## ***Background***

Many developed countries have a national network of women scientists which acts to enhance the participation of women in careers in science<sup>1</sup>. These networks are membership organisations which arrange meetings, facilitate access to a mentoring scheme and provide support for women in scientific careers. The UK had a national network, AWISE, the Association for Women in Science and Engineering, from 1994 until 2005 when it entered a period of dormancy following the death of its founder Dr Joan Mason. There are national networks for particular subjects, such as the Women's Engineering Society, British Computer Society Women, Institute of Physics Women's Group etc. The UKRC is planning to put useful resources into its Coalition of Women in SET which includes such organisations but also others which are not membership organisations. However there is no national network that simply covers all of the membership organisations of women in the sciences, engineering and technology, and is aligned with their missions and priorities, which have similarities with but also crucial differences from those of other initiatives in the sector.

In 2006 a group of women who had been involved in the now-dormant national AWISE felt that it was worthwhile finding out if there was sufficient demand for a national network in the UK. It was felt that such a project would be beyond the scope of volunteer effort and so funding was sought from the UK Resource Centre for Women in SET for a questionnaire to assess the demand for a network and to determine what its objectives should be.

This report describes the questions and the methodology and summarises the results of the questionnaire.

## ***Methods***

The questionnaire was designed through a collaborative effort between a number of women working in science from different backgrounds including academia, business and enterprise to ensure a well-rounded series of questions. It was implemented in an online format using Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). The questionnaire is reproduced in the Appendix.

The survey was distributed via a number of email lists including Daphnet, WES, Cambridge AWISE, BCS Women and the Institute of Physics Women's Group. From there it was forwarded on by many women to many others who might be interested. Some of the professional societies also forwarded the link to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was available from 13 April 2007 to 21 May 2007.

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<sup>1</sup> for example, Association for Women in Science (USA) [www.awis.org](http://www.awis.org); the Society for Canadian Women in Science and Technology SCWIST [www.scwist.ca](http://www.scwist.ca); BEWISE Belgian Women in Science [bewise.naturalsciences.be](http://bewise.naturalsciences.be); WISENET Australia [www.wisenet-australia.org](http://www.wisenet-australia.org)

## **Results**

### **Number of Responses**

The total number of responses was 656, of which 524 (80%) entered their name and email address requesting further information regarding development of a national network of women scientists.

### **Question 2: Objectives**

When asked which of the suggested objectives was “very important”, “moderately important” or “not important”, the rank order of priorities was always the same, no matter how the responses were subdivided into subject, or by type of employer. For example bioscientists reported the same order of priority as engineers.

The four highest priorities are:

- √ Supporting participation of girls in science, engineering and technology.
- √ Provision and promotion of career and personal development training.
- √ Meeting other women, share experiences and knowledge
- √ An independent, national voice

The next three highest priorities are:

- Ensuring that learning about women in science and practical remedies for problems is captured and retained.
- A national helpdesk for individuals and organisations, signposting available networks and resources, identify gaps in support.
- Work with other organisations to facilitate mentoring.

The lowest priorities are:

- × Hosting a national annual meeting of members.
- × Provide online support to complement meetings.
- × Sharing best practice between regional and subject networks.
- × A national contact point for international links.

The only significant difference in the rank order of priorities was amongst women who were already members of Cambridge AWISE or the Women’s Engineering Society (WES) who thought that “an independent voice” was the highest priority and placed less emphasis on the provision of career or personal development training.

### **Question 3: Objectives**

Question 3 asked respondents to elaborate further, via a free text response, about any other objectives or functions a national network might have. Many of the responses reiterated the importance of some of the objectives in Q2. Of those that mentioned other objectives, the main emphasis was on providing information for sustaining a career in science and to provide support for achieving this (by mentoring, case studies, awareness of job opportunities, career advice). Respondents said some of these functions should be available online but this should not take the place of local networks which need greater assistance and funding from a central organisation to be able to implement these objectives. In particular, co-ordination and effective liaison between local networks would

provide a stronger voice for greater public recognition of the issues relating to the careers of women in science.

Some respondents elaborated upon the idea of an independent voice by stressing the importance of getting men involved to work towards change in workplace attitudes. To work with and improve dialogue with men for inclusion of issues, to change male-oriented work ethics, for reforming job structures in science, to recognise benefits of part-time working, hence eliminate the need for women only networks.

Quote: *“Working with men and gender diversity provides better results”.*

A minority of respondents (approx 10%) disagreed with the concept of a women-only network as it perpetuates women as a special minority. They suggested that it was better to be supported within their institutes and companies. One went so far as to say:

Quote: *“I disagree with positive discrimination for women. Women should compete with men on their own merits”.*

This emphasises the need to ensure that the objectives of a national network are made clear, in particular that networks for women do not necessarily exclude men but do approach issues from women’s perspectives.

It also illustrates the widespread misunderstanding about positive action and positive discrimination, and the general lack of sophistication in this sector about gender issues.

**Table 1 Scores and rank order of priority for the objectives of a national network.**

616 responses in total	score (very important = 1; moderately important = 2; not important = 3) the lower the score the more important the objective					rank order of priority 1 is highest, 11 is lowest.				
	all	biosciences	academia	engineering, ,IT,physics	AWISE/WES member already	all	biosciences	academia	engineering, ,IT,physics	AWISE / WES member already
An independent, national voice	1.45	1.52	1.45	1.33	1.23	4	4	4	3	1
A national helpdesk for individuals and organisations ..signposting .. identify gaps in support.	1.56	1.57	1.54	1.54	1.45	7	6	6	6	6
A national contact point for international links.	1.84	1.9	1.82	1.85	1.8	10	10	10	10	10

Meeting other women .. share experiences and knowledge	1.41	1.49	1.41	1.32	1.26	3	3	3	2	2
Ensuring that learning about women in science and practical remedies for problems is captured and retained.	1.52	1.54	1.52	1.51	1.41	5	5	5	5	5
Hosting a national annual meeting of members.	2.12	2.19	2.12	2.13	2.04	11	11	11	11	11
Provide online support to complement meetings.	1.74	1.79	1.78	1.76	1.65	9	9	9	9	9
Sharing best practice between regional and subject networks.	1.67	1.76	1.73	1.64	1.59	8	8	8	8	8
Work with other organisations to facilitate mentoring.	1.54	1.59	1.57	1.52	1.47	6	7	7	7	7
Provision and promotion of career and personal development training.	1.33	1.34	1.34	1.38	1.33	2	2	2	4	4
Supporting participation of girls in science, engineering and technology.	1.24	1.28	1.22	1.18	1.26	1	1	1	1	2

## Membership and value of existing formal networks for women in SET

Only 26% of the 584 respondents belonged to a formal network (defined as a network with an organising committee and a programme of events). Of these, 153 women, 105 belonged to one network, 31 belonged to two networks and 13 belonged to more than two networks. The networks mentioned most frequently were:

AWiSE*	41*
Women's Engineering Society	25
IOP Women in Physics Group	16
Daphnet	14
UKRC**	12**
BCSWomen	8
Daphne Jackson Trust	5
MentorSET	5
SET	5

\* Including AWiSE 17, Cambridge AWiSE 22, Oxford AWiSE 2 ScotAWiSE 1

\*\* Including UKRC 9, GetSETWomen 1, Jive 1, Setwomenresource 1

It was not always possible to identify exactly which network was intended. In total nearly 90 networks were mentioned,

not all were women only networks. Some were based in the US, Australia or Europe although only 1% described themselves as living overseas. It should be remembered that the questionnaire was circulated via email through networks so the frequency with which networks are mentioned may reflect which networks it was circulated to.

Other networks mentioned included: Rolls-Royce Women, Women in Technology, ResNet, Earth Sciences Women's Network, European Women in Mathematics, International Network of Women Engineers and Scientists, Equalitec, GASAT, ICEFLOE (Equal Opportunities Group of the Institution of Civil Engineers), Medical Women's Federation, National Association of Women in Construction, Shell Women's Network (which is open to

all women in the company, whatever their specialisation), SET Women (Leicester), WiSETI (Cambridge), WiSET (Southampton), Women in SET (Lincoln), Women@CL.

Respondents were asked “What do you find most valuable about belonging to a formal network?” The 155 responses fell into six categories. By far the largest number of responses came in the categories of “support” (53) and “contacts and networking” (60) stressing the importance of meeting in person.

*Quote: “Meeting other people in similar situations, who I can learn from.”*

*Quote: “On a general level - it is valuable for me that a formal network exists to strive for improvements to the field I work in. On a personal level - my field of vision is constantly being updated and expanded through meetings and networking.”*

The next largest number of responses were “information and news” (41) and “events” (26).

*Quote: “The cascade of information that I would never find out otherwise.”*

*Quote: “Notification of opportunities such as career training, opportunities to mentor and be mentored, opportunities to network with women with similar careers and work interests.”*

*Quote: “Inspiring and informative presentations and workshops, on women's personal and professional development.”*

A smaller number of individuals (14) cited the related issues of “raising awareness, campaigning, influencing, policy.”

*Quote: “Ability to change policies by having a critical mass rather than trying to do it as an individual.”*

Nine women reported that they didn't feel there was much benefit to them.

### **The importance and value of professional societies**

The majority of the 578 respondents (62%) belonged to one or more professional societies: 32% belonged to one, 33% belonged to 2 and 35% belonged to three or more professional societies. The professional organizations mentioned most frequently were:

Institute of Biology	86
Institute of Physics	40
Royal Society of Chemistry	28
Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET)	22
British Computer Society	14
American Geophysical Union	12
Institution of Mechanical Engineers	12
British Psychological Society	10
Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)	10
Society for Experimental Biology	10
Society for General Microbiology	10
Association for Science Education	9
Biochemical Society	9

British Ecological Society	9
British Society for Cell Biology	9
Higher Education Academy	9
British Neuroscience Association	8
Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE)	7
British Association for Cancer Research	6
British Society for Developmental Biology	6
British Society for Immunology	6
Institute of Biomedical Science	6
Royal Meteorological Society	5
Society for Neuroscience	5

Dissemination of research through conferences, meetings and journals as well as exchange of information through newsletters and online information exchange were the most important functions for respondents to the question “What do you find most valuable about belonging to a professional organisation?” Opportunities for career progression and professional development were also very important.

*‘Being kept up to date with recent research and developments in my field.’*

*‘Information about the current state of my subject and about general opportunities for training and interaction.’*

*‘Meeting people also working in the field and making contacts, which allows the building of professional relationships, seeking advice, setting up collaborations etc.’*

*‘Gives me a recognised professional qualification and opportunities for Continuing Professional Development.’*

*‘Discounted attendance at meetings; discounts on books/journals; society newsletters; access to membership lists’*

## **Informal Networks**

Of the 574 respondents, only 15% belonged to an informal network. Most women felt that informal networks were valuable because they provided a place to talk about professional or personal issues in a trusted, friendly environment. One woman said she valued “being connected”. Many women said meeting or talking with their network helped them feel less stressed or isolated. Several mentioned their network provided the support or motivation to carry on in a male-dominated area – that having an informal women’s network “makes them feel less alone, and more empowered to stay in science”.

*“Having people you can contact on an informal basis to ask questions and advice. Obtaining an impression of the area of work so that problems you are having might actually be identical to those they are having and it is often the environment, not just you!”*

It is important to note that some women said that while they valued opportunities to meet with other women in their male-dominated areas, they felt that these meetings often ended in people ‘having a moan’. One woman said,

*"We have lunchtime talks, which are sometimes interesting and a good place to meet other women in science- but it turns too often into a complaining session about how hard-done-by we are."*

Despite some negative comments, the overwhelming response was that women in science, engineering and technology find informal networks valuable as a way to exchange information with friendly women in similar situations, as well as an important source of support when they're feeling isolated.

### **What do you need or what would you like to see that is not provided by existing networks?**

Women most want career development, including mentoring. The types of career development desired include training in negotiating for promotions and better conditions, dealing with colleagues and how to balance work with other commitments. Many women want to encourage and support younger women starting out in science, others want support for moving into senior positions and personal development.

Women also want a strong voice for women in science, to lobby for better representation of women in science and greater equality in the workplace. One woman said

*"a louder voice"*

is needed. Another called for:

*"A public face for the issue of 'women in science'. For instance, an organization to take a visible, public stand on the issue when things arise like when the former president of Harvard suggests that perhaps women are not as capable as men to do science. Since there is no organisation for media to contact to rebut this view, there is no public rebuttal, and his viewpoint is the one that stands, permeating society and trickling down to discourage young women."*

Many women want a united non-governmental lobbying group that represents women in science. Several women commented that while the UKRC was useful for providing information it did not represent women scientists and was unable to fulfil this lobbying role because of its ties to the government. One woman said:

*"An independent organisation run by women in science themselves is more directly relevant to my life and career than a government-run body. The National Women in SET organisation is fine as far as providing resources, statistics etc, but for actually communicating with others in similar positions I feel that an independent group is better. A more 'grass-roots' organisation just appeals to me more, rather than something imposed."*

How women want to relate to the network was an important topic. The majority want to attend events in their area, whether it be Scotland, Wales or at least outside London. In contrast several women said attending face-to-face meetings would be too hard and they would like online networking, or as one woman said,

*"...a kind of MySpace for women in SET".*

Many women wanted a well designed website with current information and resources; some want email updates. Several women want to see consolidation of existing networks for women in SET, and a national contact point and administrative infrastructure.

Several women felt that networks only catered for women working in science hubs, that networks were *“only interested in those members in active research at particular locations it would seem”*. Women commented they didn’t want to have to travel to London, another woman said:

*“I would like to see a regional network near me - I am envious of the programme that Cambridge AWISE has!”*

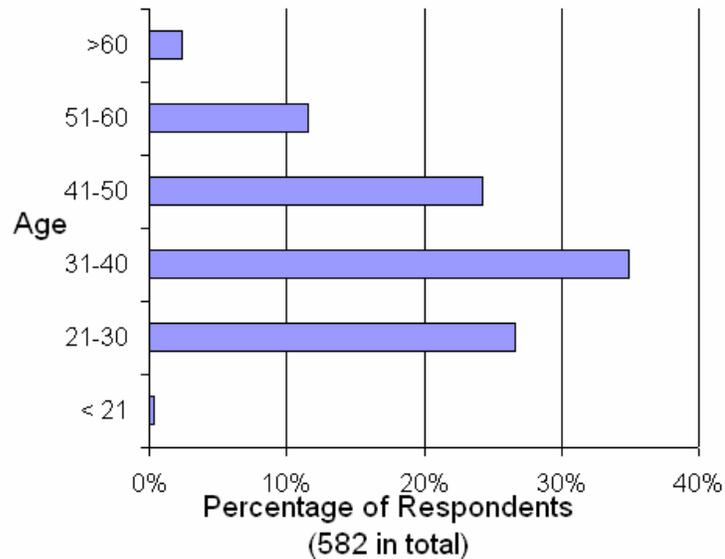
Some mothers in SET feel that existing services do not cater for them. Some women asked for childcare options to be included in event planning; others requested meetings at other times besides lunch. One woman wants:

*“more empathy for the very particular problems faced by an educated professional woman who wishes to pursue a career and also spend some quality time with her children (an understanding that the two do not need to be mutually exclusive but may just require a change in working practices)”*.

## Demographics

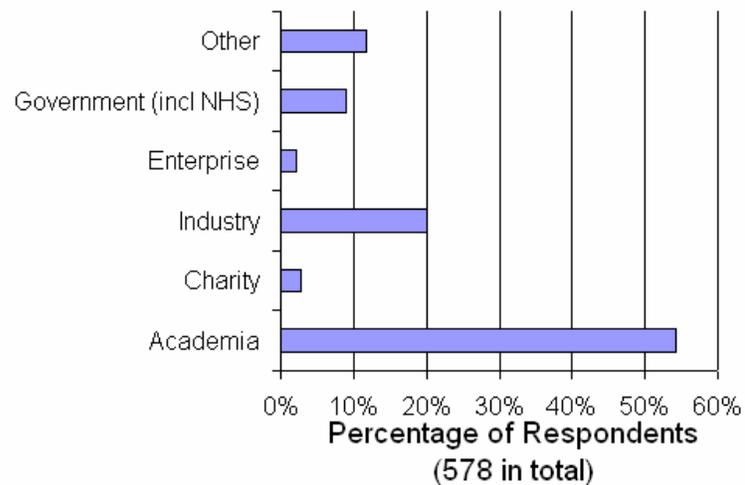
Figures 1 - 4 show the age profile, sector of work, subject specialty and geographical location of the respondents. As expected the largest age group was 31-40. Academics represented the largest sector of work and this is likely to result from the fact that academics are generally easier to contact via established email lists. Also as expected, bioscientists greatly outnumber any other subject group. The proportion found here (41 %) reflects quite closely the proportion found of females qualified in the biosciences as a proportion of all SET qualifications on the UKRC for Women in SET website (264 000 in biosciences out of 634 000 total SET qualifications = 42 %).

**Figure 1. Age profile**



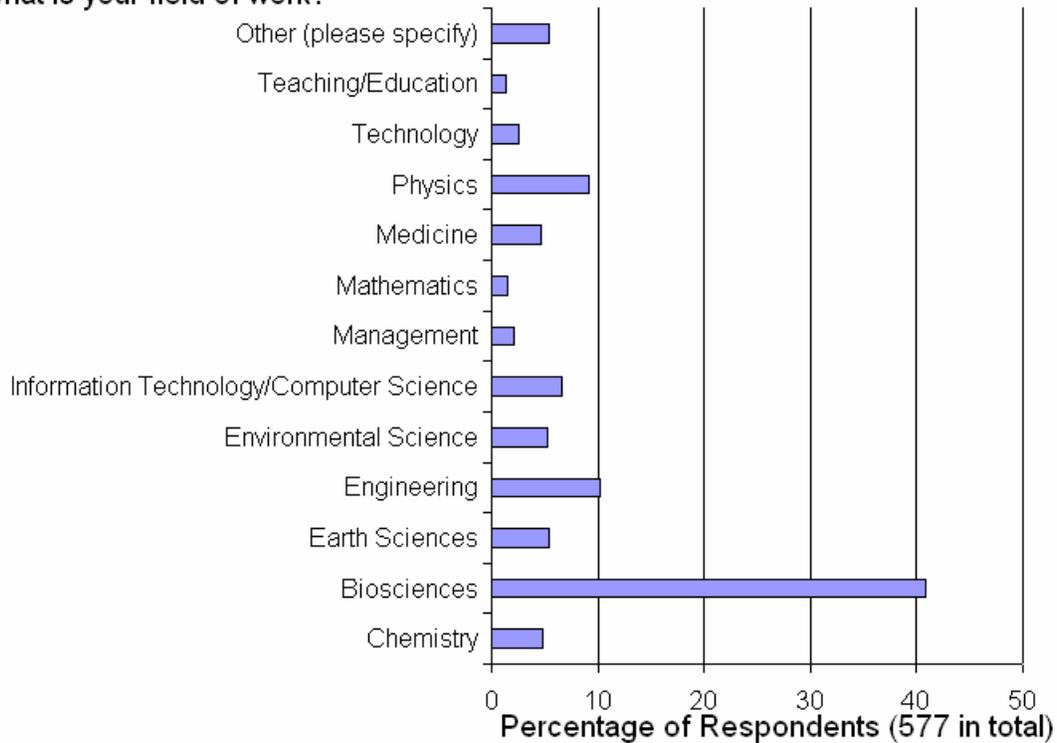
**Figure 2. Work sector**

Which sector do you work in?



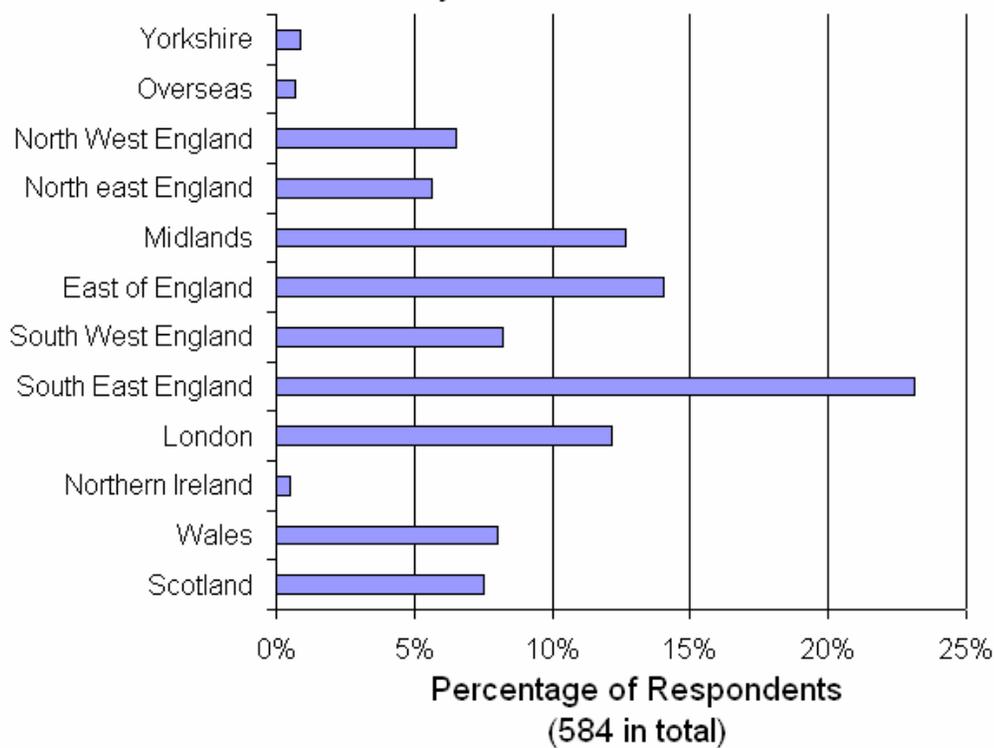
**Figure 3. Subject specialty**

What is your field of work?



**Figure 4. Geographical location.**

Where do you live?



## **How would a national network for women in science, engineering or technology benefit you?**

Of the 439 responses to this question, the majority were positive and clear. A third of the replies expressed a desire for networking. The need to network (for career progression and to be in contact with women in similar situations) via regional meetings and also on-line was highlighted. A fifth of the replies specifically mentioned the need to share information on gender specific issues of women currently working in science, considering career breaks, or on career breaks, isolation from the scientific world, work life balance etc.

A third of respondents (~ 150 women) would like to see a national network for women in SET as an “umbrella group, co-ordinating information, work and women in this area”. Without “re-inventing the wheel” as stated by one respondent, they would like to see this group bring together all the networks and resources available out there already. This “one stop shop would provide easy access to numerous other links”. Respondents would like to see links which would include sites providing as follows: job opportunities, career advice, development and training, funding opportunities, gender specific issues, work-life balance, job sharing, confidence, legal issues and even up to date scientific information in their field.

The need for a national group with regional subgroups was repeatedly mentioned. Most women are unable to travel long distances to network, due to family commitments, financial and work restrictions. Replies suggested that these regional groups should provide mentoring, talks on gender-specific issues, presentations by interesting speakers “role models” and career progression/ changes. The desire for a facility for being a mentor and being mentored at a regional level was also mentioned alongside encouraging scientists at all stages of their careers, particularly young scientists, also came out strongly.

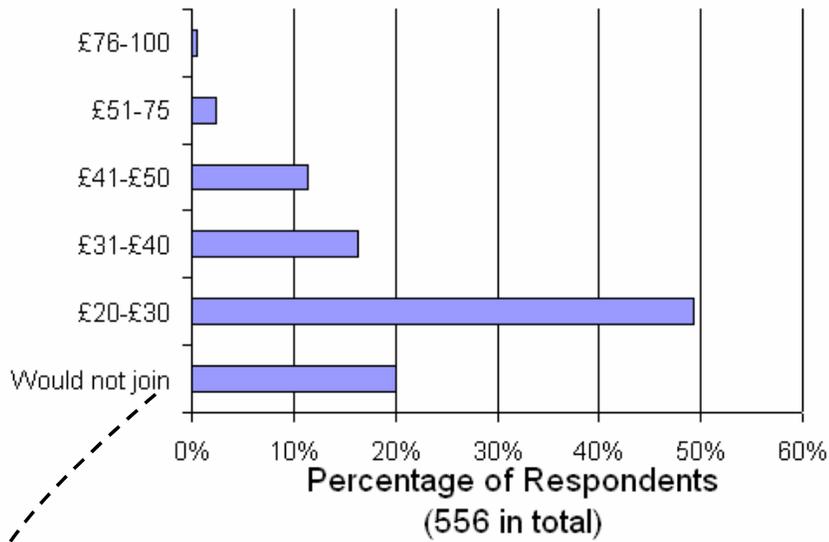
The need for a political/national voice was also highlighted by 10% of respondents.

A minority (5%) were unsure how this network could benefit them. 8% did not feel that it would benefit them and 1.8% specifically mentioned that a network should be available to both males and females.

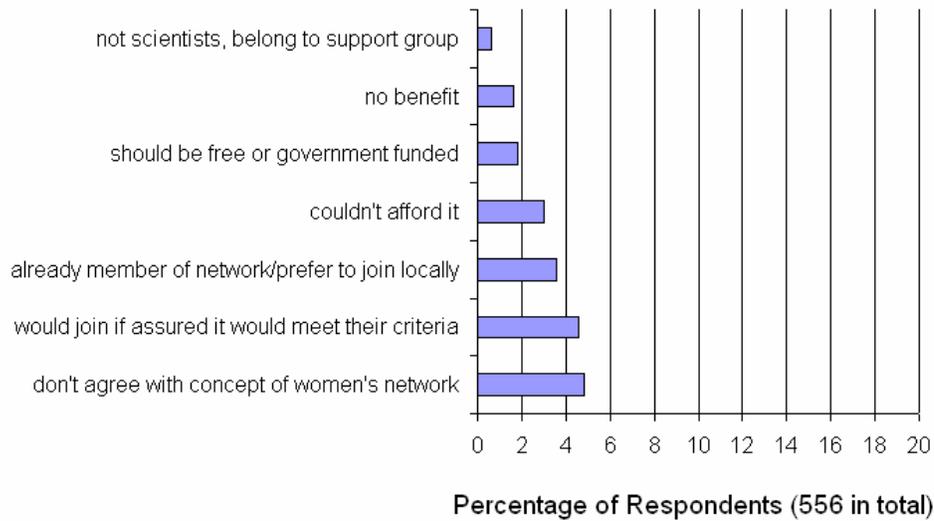
## Willingness to pay

Figure 5. How much would you be willing to pay per year?

How much would you pay?



When asked "why wouldn't you join?" the answers were:



## ***Concluding Remarks***

Women were, on the whole, supportive of the idea of a national network of women in science, engineering and technology. 95 % of respondents would join the network, 80 % would pay at least £20. There were four clear and consistent objectives for such a network:

1. Supporting participation of girls in science, engineering and technology.
2. Provision and promotion of career and personal development training.
3. Meeting other women scientists, engineers and technologists, enabling women to share experiences and knowledge, for example, strategies for work-life balance or coping in a male-dominated environment.
4. An independent, national voice for women in science, engineering or technology with which to influence public policy, employers and public perceptions.

The responses were remarkably consistent for all of the different subject groups and employer types.

Given the way the questionnaire was distributed through email lists and contacts of currently-existing networks, it is likely that those who responded were already interested in the idea of a network either because they were familiar with one already or because they could appreciate the demand for one.

Those respondents who were already members of networks felt that they were valuable and provided career development opportunities through training and through meeting other women. How would a national network benefit individual women? There was a strong desire for networking opportunities locally but that there should be some form of overarching national organisation. This organisation could help to share information on gender specific issues, work-life balance issues, job opportunities, career advice, development and training.

What is needed that is not provided by existing networks? The responses here included the need for a stronger voice with which to influence public perception and employers' and public policy. Also important was the opportunity to meet other women in their locality, a well-designed website and consolidation of existing networks.

The challenge now is to find a structure that recognises

- In particular, the needs expressed by women in SET for greater access to opportunities to encourage the participation of girls in SET, for career and personal development training, for meeting other women in SET and for an independent voice.
- That effective networking occurs at the local or regional level.
- That women in SET are, in general, time-poor.
- That networks need to be sustainable both in their finances and in the continuing support of women willing to devote time and energy to running them.
- That to have a credible effective voice there must be a mechanism of accountability.

In addition any new national network should build-on existing networking activities rather than replacing or duplication them.

## ***Acknowledgements***

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## **Appendix**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Networks are important sources of information and support as well as a means of giving their members a joint voice.

By answering this questionnaire you can help determine the objectives and priorities of a proposed national network for women in science, engineering and technology.

There are four main sections to this questionnaire and it should only take 5 - 10 min to complete:

- 1- What objectives and functions would you like?
- 2- What other networks and/or professional organisations do you belong to?
- 3- A little about you (age, field of work, type of employer etc)
- 4- How might you benefit?

**Question 2** asked women how important they felt particular objectives for such a network were.

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Moderately important</b>	<b>Not important</b>
An independent, national voice for women in science, engineering or technology with which to influence public policy, employers and public perceptions.	0	0	0
A national helpdesk for individuals and organisations within the UK to enable signposting and access to appropriate help and information as required and identify gaps in support.	0	0	0
A national contact point for international links.	0	0	0
Meeting other women scientists, engineers and technologists, enabling women to share experiences and knowledge, for example, strategies for work-life balance or coping in a male-dominated environment.	0	0	0
Ensuring that learning about women in science and practical remedies for problems is captured and retained.	0	0	0
Hosting a national annual meeting of members.	0	0	0
Provide online support to complement meetings.	0	0	0
Sharing best practice between regional and subject networks.	0	0	0
Work with other organisations to facilitate mentoring.	0	0	0
Provision and promotion of career and personal development training.	0	0	0

Supporting participation of girls in science, engineering and technology.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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This was followed by **question 3** with a free text response box. "Please tell us any other objective you think a national network for women in science should have?"

**Questions 4 – 14** centred on which networks women are currently members of and what they value from these networks.

4. A formal network generally has an organising committee and a programme of events. Are you a member of a formal network for women in science, engineering or technology?	YES / NO
5. If yes, how many?	Free text
6. Which ones?	Free text
7. What do you find most valuable about belonging to a formal network?	Free text
8. Do you belong to any professional organizations?	YES / NO
9. If yes, how many?	Free text
10. Which ones?	Free text
11. What do you find most valuable about belonging to a professional organization?	Free text
12. An informal network is a group with no formal structure that meets occasionally, for example, a lunch club. Are you a member of an informal network for women in science, engineering or technology?	YES / NO
13. What do find most valuable about belonging to an informal network?	Free text
14. What do you need or what would you like to see that is not provided by existing networks?	Free text

**Questions 15 – 18** covered demographics.

15. What is your age?	<input type="radio"/> under 21, <input type="radio"/> 21-30, <input type="radio"/> 31-40, <input type="radio"/> 41-50, <input type="radio"/> 51-60, <input type="radio"/> over 60
16. Which sector do you work in?	<input type="radio"/> academia, <input type="radio"/> charity, <input type="radio"/> industry, <input type="radio"/> enterprise, <input type="radio"/> government (incl NHS), <input type="radio"/> other
17. What is your field of work?	<input type="radio"/> chemistry, <input type="radio"/> biosciences, <input type="radio"/> earth sciences, <input type="radio"/> engineering, <input type="radio"/> environmental science, <input type="radio"/> information <input type="radio"/> technology, <input type="radio"/> management, <input type="radio"/> mathematics, <input type="radio"/> medicine, <input type="radio"/> physics, <input type="radio"/> technology, <input type="radio"/> other (please specify)
18. Where do you live?	<input type="radio"/> Scotland, <input type="radio"/> Wales, <input type="radio"/> Northern Ireland <input type="radio"/> London, <input type="radio"/> South-east England, <input type="radio"/> South-West England

**Questions 19 – 21** asked more about the network.

19. How would a national network for women in science, engineering or technology benefit you?	free text
20. How much would be willing to pay per year as for individual membership of a national network for women in science (not including discounts for students and those not in full time employment)?	<input type="radio"/> would not join <input type="radio"/> £21-30 <input type="radio"/> £31-40 <input type="radio"/> £41-50 <input type="radio"/> £51-75 <input type="radio"/> £76-100
21. If you answered 'would not join' to the above question, please give your reasons.	free text