WiSER Conference

From Surviving to Thriving: Women in Science

Held on Monday, 22nd October 2007 in Trinity College Dublin

“The workforce of the future is female” – so said Professor Eileen Drew of the Department of Statistics in Trinity College at the conference “From Surviving to Thriving: Women in Science”, hosted by the Centre for Women in Science & Engineering Research (WiSER) in Trinity College Dublin on 22nd October. The conference aimed to examine the underlying causes behind, and explore solutions to, the under-representation of women in the sciences.

The event was well-attended, with attendees arriving from all over Ireland to hear the discussions. Postgraduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and academic staff from lecturer to professor level were all present, along with industry representatives. Attendees heard discussions on a wide range of topics, and were given an important opportunity to network with others in the same field, to share their experiences and to receive advice on developing and sustaining a rewarding career in science.

The conference, held in the School of Nursing, was launched by Professor Frank Gannon, Director General of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI). In his opening address, Professor Gannon expounded SFI’s commitment to increasing the numbers of women competing at the highest level of scientific research in Ireland, and the importance of events such as this one in highlighting the causes behind women’s under-representation in scientific fields.

The morning sessions provided insight into the many and varied schemes in operation, at both national and individual university level, targeted at women in science. Professor Drew examined the changing face of work and family life in Ireland, and what this means for the ways people work, arguing that a greater flexibility in our collective attitude to what constitutes ‘normal’ working practice will be necessary. WiSER Director Caroline Roughneen spoke about the variety of initiatives run by the Centre, and highlighted the importance of organisations such as WiSER in supporting women to remain in academic science careers. Of particular interest to the audience was the presentation by Professor Madeleine Ennis of Queens University, Belfast, on the extremely successful mentoring programme which Professor Ennis runs there.

The afternoon sessions prompted a change in tone as two successive panels of female academics from all career stages shared their experiences of working in academic science, and the obstacles they faced in getting to where they now are, with the audience. The frank and often personal discussion elicited a huge response from the attendees, who expressed their appreciation at the panellists’ honesty.

The broad range of topics discussed over the course of the day afforded all present with an opportunity to discover what is taking place in institutions around the country, and to ascertain how the crucial issues surrounding women in science are being fore-grounded by universities who recognise the necessity of addressing these matters. While it was
recognised that there is no single solution to the causes of the under-representation of women in science, it is hoped that the initiatives showcased, as well as the further ideas generated at the conference, will provide a framework with which to move forward and nurture the retention and increased participation of female scientists in the field.