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The Irish funding agency, Science Foundation Ireland, is at the forefront of progressive policies designed to improve gender balance in the research they fund. These policies have gradually been introduced to respond to a need to ensure that excellence--and not whether they are having children--is the only criteria determining womens' chance of being funded. In this opinion piece, SFI's Fiona Blighe explains how the various schemes in place work.

Progressive policies to improve the gender balance in scientific research



SFI's policies facilitate womens' participation in research during child bearing age

Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) is the largest source of funding for Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) research in Ireland's Higher Education system. Of the 451 active award holders in SFI's portfolio [21% are women](#). While this percentage is comparable to that seen by other funders [across Europe](#) and worldwide, SFI has made the strategic decision to improve it.

Our motivation for doing this is supported by a considerable body of research which [shows](#) that organisations with diverse teams and diverse leadership are more successful. Almost half of new STEM PhD graduates in Ireland are women. There is therefore an opportunity to drive diversification

in teams--and ultimately in leadership--by enabling these women to remain in scientific careers. Furthermore, this approach will ensure that there is an optimal return on the considerable investment already made by the Irish State in training them.

Leaky pipeline

Analysis of the typical STEM academic career pipeline reveals that the proportion of women drops at each career stage: from PhD student to postdoc, to lecturer right up to chaired professor. This is known as the '[leaky pipeline](#)' phenomenon and is seen in almost every field, university and country.

In 2014, SFI introduced a [maternity allowance](#) providing our award holders with funding when either they themselves or a team member takes a period of maternity or adoptive leave. These funds can be used by the research body to hire additional staff to support the administration of the project, to hire a replacement team member or to extend the project so that the team member can complete their work after returning from leave.

It is hoped that by making this allowance available, awards made under SFI funding schemes do not preclude or unintentionally discourage the hiring of female researchers. The intention is to make researchers feel supported during care giving times; in particular, after the birth of a child, which can be a critical time in a woman's career.

The [She Figures 2012](#) report by the EC shows that the steepest loss of women in the career pipeline occurs at the critical point between PhD graduation and first lecturer position. To address and possibly reverse this leak, SFI launched the [Advance Award Programme](#) in 2014, as part of a number of initiatives. Targeted exclusively towards women, applications were accepted from those individuals who had taken career breaks for care giving reasons and wished to return to research.

The scheme is also aimed at those who were seeking to up-skill through increased mentorship. Successful applicants were funded to undertake industry-facing research projects and were paired with both an academic and an industrial mentor. These awards are due to finish towards the end of 2016.

Diversifying support schemes

As part of our grant allocation, we strive to ensure that our processes do not disadvantage anyone because of their gender--excellence being our main criterion. For example, in 2015, women interested in the academia industry interface were directed to the [Industry Fellowship](#) call. Due to the high application rate from women, 50% of awards were given to women.

As a further approach to address the leaky pipeline, SFI has provided incentives to increase the number of female applicants to our flagship early career programme, the Starting Investigator Grant (SIRG [*To be inserted at production stage* : [http://www.sfi.ie/sfi-starting-investigator-research-grant-\(sirg\)-programme-2015.htm](http://www.sfi.ie/sfi-starting-investigator-research-grant-(sirg)-programme-2015.htm)]). SIRG provides the best and brightest early-stage researchers with four years funding for themselves and one PhD student under the mentorship of a senior academic.

Previously, applications to the SIRG programme were capped at five applications per research body, with no reference to gender balance. In 2015, the cap was raised to 12 provided no more than six of the applications made per research body were from male applicants. The rationale behind this action was that female application to the programme have been steady at around 25% for a number of years, and this is not representative of the 50% of STEM PhD graduates in Ireland who we know are women. In 2015, 44% of applications to the programme were women, a significant improvement.

Tackling balance at all levels

As an additional support mechanism for researchers, in particular women, further along the career pipeline, review criteria for our [Investigators Programme](#), endowed with €2.5 million over 5 years, stipulates that reviewers consider career breaks and periods of part-time work undertaken by the applicant when assessing their productivity over a time frame. The Investigator Career Advancement (ICA) category aims to support researchers returning to active academic research after a prolonged absence. Successful ICA applicants are also permitted to request funding for teaching buyout so as to further support them in their return to research.

Finally, a large part of what we do as an agency involves using international expert reviewers. Thus, we have also examined the composition of our review panels and have an organisation-wide target of securing a minimum 30% female reviewers as part of any panel. We view this as a means of involving more women in the decision-making process. We also hope that their participation empowers them to progress on the academic ladder in their home institutions. In addition, we are investigating the provision of mandatory online unconscious bias training to all our international reviewers before they provide reviews of any such proposals.

Through our seat on the Science Europe [Gender and Diversity Working Group](#) and the [Athena SWAN Ireland](#) Committee we are constantly benchmarking ourselves against international best practice. And we are always searching for new and innovative ways to further retain and support women in research. If anyone has any more ideas on how to do that, we welcome further suggestions.

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