

WISE: Stemming the flow of gender inequality across the sciences

The WISE Campaign is a membership organisation that provides expert resources and advice for businesses and a network designed to encourage UK women to pursue STEM courses and careers, tackling the current gender inequality issues seen within the STEM sector (science, technology, engineering and maths). In the 33 years that have passed since its foundation, WISE has worked tirelessly to ensure women receive equal rights to men, in terms of support, opportunities and career progression. At the heart of this success has been **Helen Wollaston** – WISE's Chief Executive since 2012 – who recently spoke to us about the organisation's programmes, successes and what more needs to be done.

Despite the gender bias and years upon years of walls put up by sexism, women have made significant and breakthrough contributions to science from the earliest times. However, there are far fewer women than men working in scientific, mathematical, engineering and technological careers (STEM) across the globe.

The UK WISE campaign is one of the groups set up to attempt to tackle this issue. WISE enables and energises people in business, industry and education to increase the participation, contribution and success of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. WISE members inspire girls to choose maths, physics and computing. WISE members attract, retain, develop and progress female talent in their companies. Their mission? Gender parity in the UK's scientific, technology and engineering workforce – from classroom to boardroom. We caught up with WISE's Chief Executive, Helen Wollaston, to talk about the science behind the lack of women in STEM and what can be done to change this.

Can you tell us more about WISE, the campaign and its heritage?

WISE was established in 1984 following the Finnieston Report on the future of engineering in the UK, which emphasised the need for a broad talent pool of scientists and engineers. Beryl Platt, an aeronautical engineer, used her position on the board of the Engineering Council and Chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission to found a campaign to encourage more girls into science and engineering. A fleet of specially-equipped WISE buses, funded by industry, visited schools to give girls hands-on experience with technology and electronics.

WISE in 2017 is an independent social enterprise, with a mission to support gender balance in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), from the classroom to the boardroom. We have 160 corporate members spanning industry, academia and charities, with our revenue coming from membership fees, sponsorship, training, events, consultancy and job advertising. ▶

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Helen Wollaston,
Chief Executive of
the WISE campaign

To summarise what we do, we:

- Share insight and knowledge about the causes of and solutions to gender imbalance in STEM in the UK, from classroom to boardroom
- Collaborate with and connect WISE members (individuals and organisations) to be THE leaders, role models and champions of gender balance in science, technology and engineering
- Amplify impact through inspirational events and campaigns

How has WISE developed from 1984 to today? For example, how have attitudes and perceptions developed towards women in science from the 80s?

The shortage of engineering talent in the UK is felt today more acutely than ever, coupled now with a digital skills shortage, affecting every sector. Today, we get interest in WISE from financial services, retail, travel, the media and others – it goes way beyond traditional engineering firms. The explosion in data has created enormous demand for people with analytical skills which is great news for anyone with scientific training, as there are so many exciting career choices available. Our corporate members actively want to attract and retain women in their business because they recognise that diverse teams produce better results.

What has your personal experience been as a woman in a leading role?

I love it! My position at WISE opens doors to the highest echelons of business, industry and policy-making. I learn things every day from the wonderful people working in the team, the membership and the wider campaign. I would recommend it to anyone who cares passionately about making a difference.

What impact has WISE had so far?

Every year, we monitor the percentage of women in “core STEM”, i.e. physical sciences, engineering and technology. The good news is that numbers are steadily rising, but we are a long, long way from gender balance. Women make up just 21% of the core STEM workforce in the UK, and only 7% of women leave the UK education system with a core STEM qualification, compared to 24% of men. We will make a bigger impact through the power and influence of our growing corporate membership – these are the educators, professional institutions and employers who can make a difference to these numbers.



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What are your personal achievements and highlights at WISE?

My proudest achievement is to have created a financially sustainable social enterprise, employing 14 people from an organisation which had no revenue stream five years ago when the Government contract for a national resource centre on women in STEM (the UKRC) came to an end. The WISE Awards are a highlight of the year, presented by our patron, Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal. I was delighted last year that our inaugural WISE Man of the Year Award attracted the third most nominations of all ten categories.

Can you tell us about the WISE projects?

WISE has products, events and resources to impact on gender balance in STEM from classroom to boardroom. These include:

- People Like Me is a revolutionary resource for teachers and STEM ambassadors to engage with girls aged 11 – 14.
- Launched earlier this year, the Apprentice Toolkit provides practical advice to employers, training providers and apprenticeship training associations who want to get more women onto their STEM apprenticeship programmes.
- The WISE Ten Steps is a CEO-led framework to create an inclusive culture

Testing nominations for WISE Toy Award 2017 at Eureka

We organise conferences and events to share fresh insights on gender parity in science, technology and engineering, from classroom to boardroom – connecting people to make a bigger difference.

What reception has the WISE campaign to increase the participation, contribution and success of women in STEM had?

Everyone wants to talk to us, as the issue is high on the agenda for business, industry, Government and in academia. It can be a problem for a small team, but we are lucky to have willing volunteers through our Young Women's Board, WISE Award winners and wider membership to spread the campaign message far and wide. Our growing Twitter following is testament to the level of interest in the campaign.

WISE has substantial support with, like you mentioned, Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal as a patron. What impact has this had on the success of WISE as an organisation? Do you think these types of supporters inspire more women?

We are privileged to have such an engaged and knowledgeable Royal Patron. Award winners tell us that being presented with a WISE Award by Her Royal Highness is the best moment of their life. Her impact and influence is felt at all levels, from her challenge to business leaders, to her inspiring speeches to students.

How do you ensure that WISE's campaign is not negative towards men?

We work with men all the time because WISE is a business to business organisation. The men involved in WISE are 100% committed to gender balance because they see the business benefits. Some have a personal commitment as fathers, to build a better future for their own daughters. We actively encourage men to join the campaign and advise our members to do the same for their internal gender balance programmes.

What needs to be done to ensure that women continue to enter STEM education and careers?

Talking to girls about the type of person who enjoys science, technology and engineering is an effective way to get them interested. Emphasising skills such as creativity, communication and problem solving – all of which women are good at – helps to make STEM subjects and careers more relevant to them. We also find many women are inspired by the social or environmental purpose of their work. One of this year's WISE awards is

for a woman using engineering or technology to improve patient care or treatment, because we can use their stories to inspire more girls to choose science.

What are your hopes and plans for the future at WISE?

My vision is that any girl growing up in this country, no matter what her background, is as likely as her brother to love physics, technology or engineering. Encouraged by her proud parents and teachers in her choice of these subjects, she goes on to have her pick of jobs and careers in companies which are as likely to be led by women as by men. When this vision comes to pass, the UK will be known across the world as THE best place to be a woman in science, technology or engineering. Our country and our economy will thrive on the creativity and innovation of our diverse scientific workforce.

My hopes and plans are to grow WISE membership and accelerate progress towards this vision in my lifetime. We really can't afford to be still talking about how to get more women into STEM in 30 years' time. We know what the issues are – let's work together to address them.

• For further information about the WISE Campaign – its programmes, awards, or how to get involved and become a member – please visit their fantastic website at www.wisecampaign.org.uk.



- one where women can do their best work and thrive.
- The WISE Awards celebrate women, men and organisations who champion gender balance in science, technology and engineering in the UK. We look for individuals and organisations who will work with WISE to inspire others to follow in their footsteps.



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