

Rosalind Franklin Tenure-track Fellowships

Talented women come to Groningen. (Translation of an article that appeared in a Dutch Gender Newsletter).

"Women simply do not apply" It is the rejoinder often heard from selection committees when asked why no women were interviewed. "We would like to appoint women, but they just do not seem to be out there." This reply seems at odds with the noticeable increase in the number of female Ph.D. graduates over the past two decades. The Rosalind Franklin programme recently completed by the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences of the University of Groningen tells a different story. Top women scientists are "out there" and they do apply if the offer is sufficiently attractive. 112 women scientists from all over the world applied for five tenure track positions. We hope that this successful programme can serve as an example for other faculties at other universities.

In the Netherlands women comprise less than 8 % of the permanent scientific staff in the exact and life sciences (Helsinki report 2002). This is one of the lowest percentages in the European Union, despite the fact that Dutch women account for a similar proportion of Ph.D. degrees as in other EU countries. The Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences of the University of Groningen is no exception: 7 % of the permanent scientific staff and only 5 of the 70 or so professors are women. This faculty is comprised of not only the exact sciences: physics, astronomy, chemistry, computing science and mathematics, but also the life sciences: biology and pharmacy which have a high percentage of women undergraduate and graduate students.

The Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences are committed to increasing the percentage of women in the permanent scientific staff. The creation of The Rosalind Franklin Fellowship Programme is an important step in this direction.

The Faculty reserved 5 tenure-track positions for women. Conform the new faculty tenure-track system the appointments are initially for 5 years and come with funds for the appointment of a Ph.D. student plus a small budget for travel and/or consumables. They are free to choose the research group they wish to associate with. After 5 years there is a formal review and if this is positive, the position becomes permanent with the accompanying title of "professor".

These Rosalind Franklin fellows serve as role models. It is hoped that their presence and example will serve as a stimulus to female Ph.D. students to aim for a career in science. Within the faculty, especially in Biology and Pharmacy there are a number of women holding temporary research

***Rosalind Franklin** (1920-1958) completed her undergraduate and graduate studies in Chemistry at the University of Cambridge at the age of 26. Her research at the laboratory of Kings College, London, was an important contribution to the discovery of the structure of DNA. Franklin used X-ray crystallography in her research, whereas her colleague Wilkins used molecular methods. At the same time, Watson and Crick at the University of Cambridge were trying to discover the structure of DNA using a theoretical modelling approach. When they became aware of the results of Franklin's experiments and saw her X-ray photos (unknown to Franklin), they realised that they had empirical evidence for their theory of the double helix. Unfortunately Franklin died at the age of 37 of cancer, probably caused by poor safety measures in her earlier experiments. Had she still been alive, she would have almost certainly shared in the Nobel prize for Physiology and Medicine that was awarded in 1962 to Watson, Crick and Wilkins. Today her work is a shining example to young, brilliant female scientists who are engaged in a career in science.*

positions, but it is essential to create a nucleus of successful women scientists in the permanent staff. The table below shows the situation in the The Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences as of 31-12-2002.

Scientific staff Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, 31-12-2002

	Number of women	Percentage of women
Ph.D.	90	31%
Other scientific staff (mainly temporary)	61	27%
Lecturer	8	12%
Senior lecturer	5	8%
Professor	3*	4%

Source: Bureau University of Groningen, 2003

* as per 1 June 2003: 5 women

Since then, two women have been appointed as professor and five Rosalind Franklin Fellows have been appointed to a tenure-track UD position.

The selection process

Last October the advertisement appeared in Nature, Science and several Dutch newspapers. Despite the high prerequisites- postdoc experience abroad, publications in top international journals and evidence of international recognition- 112 applications from all over the world were received.

Twenty one applicants were Dutch, about fifty were from other EEC countries and nine from the U.S.A. A broad spectrum of disciplines was represented, including biology, mathematics, chemistry, physics, biochemistry, pharmacy, astronomy and computer science. The largest number (about fifty) were from biology, followed by about twenty five from physics.

From the 112 candidates 18 (5 Dutch) were invited to Groningen for an interview and to present a lecture. These lectures formed a series of "Rosalind Franklin Lectures" that were held in the weeks 9-17 April.

After careful deliberation and consultation with additional scientific experts from the faculty, the selection committee arrived at a ranking of the best 8 candidates. These eight women all had considerable research experience at top international institutions, they had published in top journals and they were all internationally recognized. Two candidates were Dutch, but at the time were working abroad. The Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences was so impressed by the high quality that they decided to offer all 8 a fellowship.

The result

Five women (Italian, Spanish, German and 2 Dutch) have accepted a Rosalind Franklin Fellowship: two physicists, a chemist, a mathematician, and a biologist. Three have declined in favour of other offers. From the above table it is clear that the Rosalind Franklin Fellowship programme has led to a considerable increase in the percentage of women in the permanent scientific staff in the faculty, so making the participation of women in the faculty more visible.

Moreover, this programme has proven that there are sufficient talented women who are engaged in science and who have ambitions to climb the academic ladder.

When the positions are attractive and allow a wide spectrum of scientific endeavour, women most certainly do apply.

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