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## Universities need to promote more women to professor

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Just a quarter of all university professors are female.

**Women are still underrepresented in leadership positions in universities – this has to change**

“Science and everyday life cannot and should not be separated.” Those were the words uttered by pioneering British scientist Rosalind Franklin, who firmly believed that the pursuit of science should be accessible to all.

As a woman working in the first half of the 20th century, Franklin’s contributions to some of the greatest scientific discoveries of our time – including the structure of DNA – were sadly overlooked in her lifetime.

One of my proudest moments in my role as universities and science minister was being able to go some way to redress this injustice last month, by unveiling the new Mars rover named after this brilliant British scientist.

Today, on International Women's Day, it is only right that we recognise the important work of female scientists like Franklin and seek to honour her memory by inspiring more women and girls to follow in her footsteps.

More than 60 years after Franklin's death, we are thankfully living in a different world, where women play an important part in every echelon of our society – not least in science, innovation, higher education and research.

UK universities are world leaders when it comes to advancing and promoting gender equality. The Athena SWAN charter, initially established to improve the representation of women in scientific disciplines in higher education, now has 145 members. It has also expanded to promote gender equality in multiple disciplines – including the arts, social sciences, humanities, business and law.

In the past decade, we have seen a 28% increase in England in the number of women accepted on to full-time undergraduate degrees in science, technology, engineering and maths (Stem subjects). And in the last academic year, women accounted for more than half of all Stem postgraduates at UK universities. The government is taking further steps to improve women's representation in science and has today awarded nine inspiring women £50,000 to develop inventions to tackle the challenges and seize the opportunities we face as a society. From new materials to cut down on plastics pollution to special devices to improve posture and comfort for wheelchair users, these women are at the forefront of creating the new technology for tomorrow.

This is significant progress, but access to higher education is only half of the equation. To have real equality in the sector, we need to ensure talented women are able to progress into the academic and leadership roles they desire, and get the remuneration they deserve.

Data shows us the ladder to success gets harder for women to climb the further up they go. Although women make up the majority of undergraduates in our universities, just under half of academic staff are female. At senior levels, only a quarter of professors are women, and black women make up less than 2% of all female academic staff.

I welcome the introduction of pro-active strategies like the new initiative at the University of Leicester, which I am visiting today, to increase the number of female professors by 1.5% each year, with the overall goal of having 30% professorships held by women by 2020.

There are also stark differences in pay across grades. The gender pay gap based on median salaries across the sector in 2016-17 was 13.7%, suggesting there is still some way to go to ensure women are rising through the ranks to higher grade positions and being paid appropriately.

When it comes to women in senior leadership positions, the proportion of female vice-chancellors has thankfully risen – from 22% in 2016 to 29% in 2018. Yet this is still far from representative.

One way of ensuring equality permeates through all levels of a university is by enhancing the diversity of governing bodies, including a fair balance between male and female board members. I am pleased that UK universities have made good headway in this area, with 55% of universities having gender-balanced boards comprising 40-60% women. The number of female chairs is also up from just 19% in 2016 to 27% in 2018.

Having women properly represented in all aspects of university life is not only a sign of a fair and inclusive society; it can also lead to a more cohesive, collaborative academic community. As I'm sure Rosalind Franklin would agree, women and academic life cannot and should not be separated.