



# The Academic Woman

## Elevating the career goals of the next generation of women

**Putting equality  
at the heart of leadership**

*Dr Lucy Jones*

**Championing women  
at the workplace**

*Dr Cheryl Greyson*

**Demystifying engineering  
for inclusivity**

*Dr Esther Norton*

**Making a difference in  
people's lives**

*Valery Emeson*



A dedicated ARU Peterborough issue

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The mission of *The Academic Woman* is to shine a spotlight on women in higher education by championing recognition, well-being and positive action for greater female empowerment.

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# STEPS TO IMPACT

*Editor's letter*

As I write this letter, I am reminded of the evening of the event held at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) Peterborough to commemorate International Women's Day (IWD). It was a truly remarkable environment to inspire inclusion. With the focus on acknowledging and celebrating women in the workplace and beyond, the event featured two keynote speeches from Professor Abi Hunt and Professor Nicola Padfield. Both Abi and Nicola underlined the importance of women watching out for one another, making their voices heard and creating networks through which women can lobby for other women (page 5).

So this issue is dedicated to celebrating the work and achievements of some women at ARU Peterborough and it's full of stories to inspire everyone. The resilient Dr Cheryl Greyson reveals that throughout her career she has had to resign from several full-time positions, turn down work-related travel opportunities and do her job in the evenings or at weekends to fit work around her daughter's needs. Cheryl outlines how providing valuable support to women requires people to understand all the different 'life stages' that they go through, whatever their age or background and her passion to support other women (page 10).

Likewise, Valery Emeson explains on page 7 why she is driven by the passion to improve the lives of people around her. Describing herself as "a woman of purpose", Valery is committed to inclusivity and works tirelessly to promote participation by students of diverse backgrounds.

The ARU Vice Principal (Academic Development), Dr Lucy Jones, also shares how important it is for women to support and influence the career paths of other women. On page eight, Lucy explains how the best way to achieve true equality in the workplace is to provide genuine support while removing bias. She highlights that all students and academic staff must have authentic role models at all stages of their career.

This is echoed by Dr Esther Norton who is on a mission to 'demystifying engineering' and making it inclusive for everyone. Esther's remarkable journey from secondary education to becoming a civil engineer and an authority in her field is a true reflection of what can be achieved through hard work and perseverance.

Delightfully, the publication of this issue marks a new partnership between *The Academic Woman* and ARU Peterborough, demonstrating both our commitment to doing "everything necessary to promote inclusiveness and introduce women to professions that are widely seen to be dominated by men", as ARU Peterborough's Principal, Professor Ross Renton, put it so succinctly at the International Women's Day event.

We are feeling really positive about this new partnership and hope you enjoy this issue of *The Academic Woman* as we continue on our journey to highlight the vital importance of women in the workplace being given maximum support and every opportunity to reach their full potential.



Anatu Mahama  
Editor-in-chief



# Inspiring inclusion in the workplace and beyond

by Nana Ama Dwomoh Nuakoh & Dr Anatu Mahama

Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) Peterborough held its inaugural event to commemorate International Women's Day (IWD). With the focus on acknowledging and celebrating women in the workplace (and beyond) and promoting their inclusion, the event featured two keynote speakers – Professor Nicola Padfield and Professor Abi Hunt.

Nicola is Professor of Criminal and Penal Justice at the University of Cambridge and Life and Honorable Fellow of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. Abi is the founder and owner of Abi Hunt Consulting as well as being a part-time Professor of Practice at the University of Nottingham, Adjunct Professor at Harlaxton College, part-time Associate Professor at The University of Lincoln, and Director of the Enabled Archaeology Foundation.

Dr Cheryl Greyson, Senior Lecturer in Business at ARU Peterborough, introduced the event and took the opportunity to stress why it was important to celebrate IWD at the university.

“As a university we are interested in organisations recruiting, retaining and developing diverse talent. We want them to provide women with access to quality education and training. We want them to support women’s advancement into business and STEM and decision-making and leadership roles.”

However, Cheryl told delegates, at the current rate of progress, it will take 131 years to close the gender pay gap around the world.

“The UK is 15th in the ranking according to the World Economic Forum. Women are still underrepresented in the STEM workforce and in new areas like artificial intelligence, while also being underrepresented in VP and c-suite roles.”



ARU Peterborough’s Principal, **Professor Ross Renton**, in his welcome address, said that the university has always done, and continues to do, everything necessary to promote inclusiveness and introduce women to professions that are widely seen to be dominated by men. He emphasised that it is ARU’s responsibility to be an activist, to challenge and to include everyone, regardless of their background, and he praised the university for its excellence in meeting these goals.

Recalling her time sitting as a judge at the Peterborough prison, **Professor Nicola Padfield** talked about the unequal treatment of women in the prison and how there was little to no chance of them finding employment when they left. She urged everyone in the audience to look at becoming volunteers or lending a hand in whatever way they could to tackle the issue at the prison because their support and assistance would be greatly appreciated.

Nicola said that when she is (often) asked what needs to change to provide support for women in the workplace, she replies that the challenge of bringing change to the workplace is deeply interconnected with how people are treated outside the workplace. There won’t be any change in the workplace until there is change in people’s homes, she said. Nicola stressed the importance of making women feel welcome in the workplace and beyond, and that involves women watching out for one another.



“We need to be women-welcoming and when we witness injustice, let’s not just stand up for ourselves. We also need to stand up for others and, above all, for those who are more disadvantaged.”

Nicola told the ARU’s International Women’s Day event audience: “Never feel that your dreams won’t come true. Always prepare for whatever you want to accomplish. Be brave to grab opportunities, be hungry for success but understand that success comes in different shapes and sizes.”



In her speech, **Professor Abi Hunt** highlighted the many obstacles faced by women in the profession of archaeology, including sexual harassment, being forced to work in underprivileged environments and receiving lower wages than men. She revealed that the contributions of women in archaeology are mostly ignored, and it is difficult to find information about archaeologists of colour or archaeologists who belong to the LGBTQ+ community.

“We must work on our attitudes and think about how our behaviours affect the academic sector and make women feel unwelcome. We must inclusively shout for change and create networks to lobby for people.”

Abi advised the audience that if they strive to celebrate each other, support each other and help make the workplace more inclusive, they can help to create a better future of inclusion for all and make the world a better place in which to live and work.

Moderated by Dr Tom Williamson, the event ended with a panellists’ discussion in which everyone was encouraged to campaign and support projects that empowered women in the workplace. Participants were asked to confront discriminatory practices head-on. There was an extensive debate about how to further women’s inclusion in the workplace, amplify various voices and offer actionable tactics to build a more equitable and inclusive professional environment.

# Your story



**Valery Emeson**, lecturer in Business at Anglian Ruskin University (ARU) Peterborough, shares her journey into academia and what drives her and how her workplace has an equitable culture ...

## Making a **difference** in **people's lives**

*“Being able to see my students progress to the next phase truly brings me joy.”*

I often find it difficult to describe myself because of all the different hats that I wear but one thing is clear – I am a woman of purpose. I am a person driven by the passion to improve the lives of people around me.

To do this, I quickly realised that I have to keep improving myself, which is how I came to forge a career in academia. I must say I have been lucky and privileged in some areas of my life and I love to reflect on that. Socrates once said that “the unexamined life is not worth living” and that quote has always influenced me.

I come from a family of educators – my dad was a lecturer and my mum was a secondary school teacher – as a child, I didn’t admire their professions. They were always bringing work home, either marking scripts or planning lessons, so most of their conversations revolved around education.

Both my parents were the first in their families to attend a university and my dad attended on scholarship because a teacher identified his strengths at an early age. The realisation that it takes one person to make a difference to someone’s life stayed with me. I didn’t immediately want to be a teacher, but I always wanted to help make a change. After more than 15 years of working in industry and starting a family, I decided I wanted to be a lecturer.

There are undoubtedly challenges that I have faced as a woman in academia. Like many other industries, the struggle is usually about balancing a woman’s unpaid domestic labour with time and paid work. Unlike some other professions where work easily ends at work, in academia your brain never stops. You are constantly dealing with emails, admin duties, lesson preparation and so on. Another challenge women face is growth; many women don’t know how to develop their academic careers. That means if you don’t have supportive management, you could spend years doing the same thing without ever experiencing growth.

I’ve been lucky in my job in that ARU has supported my career development and has shown a commitment to creating an equitable workplace culture. I have a female line manager in a predominantly male faculty, and I believe the support I get is not only because she’s a female; I think it’s because she truly believes in an equitable society. From my interactions with her, she has chosen to do things better than she may have experienced. But honestly, I believe the senior management team at my university share similar views. They have made deliberate efforts to create a supportive environment for men and women colleagues. For instance, they are open about workload balancing and have a genuine open-door policy when it comes to approaching them.

I want to stress that there are so many rewards for being in academia. They include the opportunity to co-create with students, creating hope and opportunities for students who before they came to the university, felt there was none. Being able to see my students progress to the next phase truly brings me joy. I enjoy the autonomy that comes with my career and the freedom to research things that are important to me.

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All women working in higher education are welcome to share their stories, experiences and research by granting or requesting a feature to be done on them or writing as contributors. We also welcome contributions on health & wellness.

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## Putting **equality** at the heart of leadership

As Vice Principal (Academic Development) for Anglian Ruskin University (ARU) Peterborough, **Dr Lucy Jones** is a living example of how women do not just achieve their own potential, but also support and influence the career paths of other women.

When Dr Jones is asked how women can be empowered in a genuinely equitable workplace environment, the answer isn't a complicated one. She sees providing support and removing bias as the two main pillars of any strategy for equality. That support can manifest itself in many ways but mentoring and making women feel that their worth is recognised are essential.

**"We must ensure opportunities to contribute, innovate and lead on projects are open to all and that there is no bias 'baked in' to processes. All staff must feel important, valued and listened to and students and colleagues need to have authentic role models at all stages of their career."**

Dr Jones says that her own "go for it" attitude when offering advice to female colleagues and students has helped her to support them in reaching their goals and making the right career choices.

**"Mentorship and coaching can be really valuable and encouraging female colleagues to take this up, whether internal to the organisation or through sector schemes, is important to me."**

Universities across the UK (and around the world) are working tirelessly towards creating learning environments that deliver on gender equality, inclusivity and opportunities for all students – regardless of gender or race – but they face many challenges. Dr Jones re-emphasises that the way forward must be based around listening.

**"Really listening to the student voice and ensuring all students are heard is key to fully understanding the barriers that exist for learners and finding innovative ways to remove those obstacles and drive change."**

“

We must ensure opportunities to contribute, innovate and lead on projects are open to all and that there is no bias 'baked in' to processes.

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Dr Jones adds: **"Equality must be at the heart of everything a university does. Equality of access, equality of opportunity, equality of learning experience – these should all be key strands of the student journey. Fully engaging with sector initiatives such as Athena SWAN and the Race Equality Charter, as well as broader initiatives such as Stonewall, are good ways for universities to shine a spotlight on equality issues and help drive improvement plans."**

Dr Jones also recognises the importance of allyship with male colleagues in order to deliver on the potential of women in the workplace, but she warns that if it is done without the right motivation, it can be condescending and damaging.

**"Male allyship is core to advancing gender equality both inside and outside the workplace. A great starting point is a man who understands that gender equality is everybody's responsibility and not 'just a female issue' and who then models that behaviour. However, to have any real impact, that modelling has to be deep and authentic and certainly not 'performative'."**



**Dr Lucy Jones**  
Vice Principal Academic Development  
ARU Peterborough

Women who are looking to be the best version of themselves and make a tangible difference in the world can become disillusioned if they believe that to achieve those goals, they need to be super woman.

## Demystifying engineering for inclusivity



**Dr Esther Norton**, Assistant Principal at ARU Peterborough, stresses that it's fine just to be okay at something. You can still do great things and inspire others without having to be 'Wonder Woman'.

**"A lot of the time, when you see inspirational women and you hear them speaking, they often come across as being very clever or very talented. A lot of women watching them might think: Well, I'm not very clever and I'm not very talented, so I probably wouldn't be able to do that. I'm here to tell other women that you don't need to be either of those things and you can still do what you want to do."**

Esther is all about being a mediocre role model. **"I am living proof that you don't have to be special or exceptionally good at something. You just have to work away at what drives you and you can do whatever you want."**

Dr Norton's academic journey reflects what she wants other women to understand. Despite the position she now holds, she was "very bad at maths and science" at school and preferred humanities and literature. Having done badly in her A-Levels, Esther failed to get into any universities that she applied for (mainly to study drama). To cut a long story short, her mother alerted her to engineering courses in Newcastle, but she wasn't impressed with mechanical or chemical engineering so chose the civil and environmental engineering option.

Still not fully understanding what she was studying, Esther scraped through the foundation degree, trailing theory of structures. Because this subject was so central to studying civil engineering, Esther couldn't progress further on the course and found herself working for the Post Office. During this time, however, she kept studying theories of structures until at one stage it eventually clicked.

**"I suddenly got the whole thing. So when I went back and I re-took it, I got 81%. I was actually annoyed with myself because I thought I really nailed it and couldn't understand what I'd got wrong. It didn't get any easier after that, but I knew that if I went to the library and worked away, I would eventually be able to understand whatever it was. In the end, I got a first."**

Although at one point Esther's dream was to boss people around in hard hats on construction sites, she remained in academia. After graduating, she lived in the Canary Islands for a year where she taught English. Returning to the UK, Esther applied for a job at Sheffield University as a research assistant, however, the post was already filled, but the university recognised Esther's potential and offered her a PhD opportunity instead!

**"When I had my first meeting with my supervisor, I told him I had no idea if I could do a PhD; I wasn't sure that I was capable of it. He said he didn't either because he'd never had a female student before! Of course, I found that I could do it because, again, all it took was really hard work and perseverance and I'm really very good at that."**

Today, Esther is a strong advocate of the engineering profession and continually encourages women to move into what is still a heavily male-dominated area. However, she says it's difficult to persuade women to see the value that STEM subjects can offer, let alone consider a career in that sector.

**"Whatever we're doing isn't working. When I was an undergraduate, everyone was asking how do we get more women into engineering but we're in exactly the same situation now so many years later. I think the key is in the curriculum, it's in the way that we deliver our courses, and we need to make them as inclusive as possible. Even today, a traditional engineering course has been designed by traditional engineers – and that's generally men."**

Esther stresses focusing on interconnections between things to demystify engineering, adding that the way engineering is taught needs to change, with studies based on the job of an engineer and teaching the subject through project-based learning.

**"People who want to solve climate change issues can't understand why they have to study a lot of maths. Context needs to be given to the subject so that it's not just isolated technical theory. Teaching should be based around identifying a problem that needs to be solved and then asking the question: 'What do we need to do to solve it?' This might involve maths or mechanics but what's interesting about an engineering project is the impact it will have on people, what is the environmental impact of what we're doing? We need to be thinking about all these things and I think that when we do the subject becomes interesting to people from a much wider mindset – and that has got to include women."**

Esther was able to put her approach into practice when she became Head of the School of Engineering in the Built Environment at ARU Chelmsford. The engineering curriculum was overhauled to become project-based. She carried this over to ARU Peterborough where the undergraduate mechatronic course is now project-based learning.

**"We're going to decarbonise the curriculum, we're going to bring in a lot more about green skills and green energy. That is going to become the focus of the course because now we have hardly any female students on our engineering courses and that is just not acceptable."**

Keen to promote engineering at schools and to take away the emphasis on A-Level maths which can discourage people, especially women who tend to do worse than men in the subject, Esther points out that women do better in A-Level art, solving problems through the application of materials – and that is precisely what an engineer does.

**"We want people like that on our engineering course,"** she says, **"because they are creative, and they come at the subject from a completely different angle. We need a diverse range of people to study engineering, not all people with the same mindset. We need to change people's opinions of what engineering is about but there's a big cultural shift to do. Children at school need to understand what the design process involves, and that engineering is not dirty."**

Esther concludes: **"We are in a climate emergency now and it's all hands on deck, so engineering has got to include everybody."**

# Championing women in the workplace

A champion of women in the workplace, **Dr Cheryl Greyson** is a highly experienced digital marketing practitioner and educator specialising in all aspects of marketing and research methods. She believes one of the most important ways to support women is to understand all the different 'life stages' that they go through, whatever their age or background.



*"So often, it's just about boosting women's confidence and getting them to see how great they really are."*

My cousin and I were the first women in our family to go to university. I'm most proud of my doctorate because I took my Viva exam online during the pandemic. I've never been short of determination and the thought of standing on the stage at graduation kept me going. My route to higher education was not traditional. I wanted to be a novelist and got a job working in advertising marketing for the biggest magazine company in the country.

Unfortunately, I remember my first job for all the wrong reasons. My female manager created a toxic work environment that crushed everyone in our office. Nobody was allowed to speak, which made learning how to do the job very difficult. When she was away from the office, the atmosphere transformed, and we were more productive because we were happy, motivated and enjoying our work.

I've had plenty of female managers since then and, sadly, I've had a fair few who clearly dislike other women or see them as competition. Thankfully, so many more have willingly given me career advice, shared opportunities, put me forward for projects and shown real generosity of spirit. I try to do that myself as a line manager in higher education and as a course leader by being as generous in my support as other women have been to me. So often, it's just about boosting their confidence and getting them to see how great they really are! It is my greatest privilege to follow the careers of women that I previously taught or managed and to celebrate their achievements.

Like many women, my career has been thwarted several times because of my caring responsibilities. I have a neurodiverse daughter who didn't fit into the school system and has had several periods of deep depression. Over the years, I've had to resign from full-time positions, turn down opportunities to travel for work and even worked freelance and at evenings or weekends to fit my work around her needs.

I know I'm not a unique case and there are so many professional and highly educated women who compromise their career opportunities to fight every day for their disabled children's education.

One of the effects of the pandemic that has benefited carers has been positive change around how and where we work. Flexible working has been incredibly important to me in my current role. I'm lucky that my male manager is a real ally and I feel trusted to do my job. If I need to take my daughter to a medical appointment and catch up in the evening, I can do that.

A benefit of being at my time of life is that I can be really understanding of the different life stages that my female line reports or students are going through. I actively contribute towards our staff networks, take part in social research and support policy making at ARU to make sure that women of all ages and backgrounds are supported. We need to reduce the hurdles that stop highly qualified women from progressing in academia and industry, but we can only do that through communication.

However, we need male allies to help push through change, to ask the right questions and challenge processes that could be done differently. When I first started at ARU Peterborough on the start-up team, I had no female colleagues and was really struggling with menopause symptoms. Over lunch, I mentioned to two male colleagues that we needed to start recruiting some women so I would have someone to talk to about my symptoms, at which point they both said: "You can talk to us about the menopause, we don't mind at all."

These issues aren't women only issues, they're business issues that are relevant to everyone. How do we stop carers dropping out of full-time work? How do we help women to feel supported during a transitional phase of life which can have such a dramatic impact on their physical and mental health and confidence? Career paths can be challenging to navigate, particularly in higher education, and there are definitely ways that women could be more supported to reach their potential.

## Top Tips

**First of all**, find your mentors! Writing research papers or bid applications on your own is difficult and it's much easier to learn from others who have already had success in this area. They can help you learn new skills, help you grow in confidence and a job shared makes practical sense.

**Secondly**, ask about flexible working! Job ads are hard to navigate these days, but many lecturer/senior lecturer roles can now be part-time. You can have days where you work from home or set your own hours through flexible working schemes. Business needs will obviously need to be prioritised, but flexibility over working hours can allow you to juggle your caring responsibilities.

**Finally**, join staff networks and if they don't exist, start them! HR will often support these by helping to bring in external speakers or providing access to resources. Colleagues from other faculties may also be able to share how they have dealt with a particular issue and everyone can work together to inform new policies and working practices. Like any walk of life, we are all better together.



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