

Professor Sara Ashencaen Crabtree

Case study – a passion for gender equality

About me

My name is Sara Ashencaen Crabtree and I am Professor of Social & Cultural Diversity in the Faculty of Health & Social Sciences (FHSS) at BU. I returned to the UK to take up a Senior Lectureship at BU in 2007 after a rewarding and eventful international academic career in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Hong Kong. On the home front life is also busy, being the mother of two studious teenage daughters and married to a fellow academic. Consequently the distinctions of work/home often become rather blurred and particularly when the pressure is on. On the positive side I see that my daughters have a bird's eye view of what academic life is actually like and what it takes to build a successful career as a woman professional.

My role as a Women's Academic Network (WAN) co-convenor/Athena SWAN (AS) rep

Strongly supporting and promoting academic women's progression in Higher Education (HE) is politically and personally extremely important to me and I have made that mission a commitment to my colleagues and institution. To that end, I co-founded the Women's Academic Network in 2013 and have been the main WAN co-convenor for five years. I also work on the BU Equal Pay Review Committee. It seemed logical therefore to volunteer to be the AS Self-Assessment Team (SAT) rep for my faculty, having also had some experience of the previous SAT some years before.

Why is gender equality so important to BU2025?

BU 2025 is a very ambitious plan, which is highly dependent upon the full engagement of all staff for its realisation. It cannot be done without the buy-in of women academics and thus requires the full investment of BU in its talented women staff.

Why do you personally support the work going on around our Athena SWAN application and gender equality in general?

As many research studies show women academics nationally experience conspicuous sexist discrimination in HE, where their careers are often skewed compared to those of men, in terms of inferior career advancement and pay. This is not only a costly institutional waste of staff potential, but is also unacceptable social injustice. As a woman academic, I too have been faced with some startling experiences of sexism at times and I am fully aware that my career trajectory has been slower and less straightforward in consequence than it would have been had I been born male. This has made me all the more determined to ensure that one of my legacies has been to actively work towards reducing gendered barriers and discrimination for my female colleagues. WAN and Athena Swan has provided a tremendous platform to help me to push forward my gender equality work, which also embraces my research in this area.

How has BU supported you in your career?

Being at BU has been an enriching experience where I have been able to develop initiatives that would probably not have been so available to me elsewhere. I have received strong encouragement from some key individuals, male and female, in developing my career. A huge help has been the trust shown in me by senior colleagues to take forward my plans, such as starting the sociology programmes in FHSS, developing sustainable student-staff mobility initiatives and the support given to me by the University Leadership Team (ULT) in breathing life into this wonderfully unique entity, WAN, which makes life at BU even more vibrant, positive, creative and collegial, as well as making a huge contribution to Athena SWAN. Of course, being a fully involved mother cum part-time chauffeur, cook and cleaner, as well as a full-time academic, means that I really value being able to work with informal flexibility when I need to, where for me working at home is an invaluable facility that allows me to be extremely productive. Informal mentoring has been something I have also valued and I generally have no worries about receiving good advice when I seek it.

How have BU's policies enabled you to support your team?

No institution is perfect and BU is still developing policies that are not just family friendly, but woman friendly. In my faculty we really value a working from home policy that is agile to our needs and not overly bureaucratised. This boils down to understanding what the job is about and trusting academics to get on with it. Academic work is singularly unique, it is like no other work and is hard to describe to non-academics, as it is not tied to hours or times of day, flows creatively in many complex directions, requires high levels of personal responsibility and accountability - and is incredibly varied and rigorous in its interpretations and expression. It is also very demanding, consumes long hours and can be highly stressful. Quality academic work requires peace and quiet, privacy and freedom from interruptions, particularly for women whose careers may be less established than male colleagues and whose leisure hours are comparatively fewer than those of men, owing to the unequal domestic responsibilities still generally expected of the former.

Mentoring and career development sessions are also appreciated in my faculty, particularly by women academics, and especially when individuals are suitably matched in a positive mentoring dyad. In my own team, as a senior academic, I always try to be sensitive to the needs of all colleagues, but particularly junior colleagues of both sexes. I try to make an extra effort to ensure that I signpost opportunities to my colleagues for career development and help to steer their careers in the right direction. I would sum up by saying that a cherished personal goal and privilege is to help those of my female colleagues who wish to, to climb up to where I am now. I am always happy to offer a hand, advice and the crampons!