

18 THURSDAY, MAY 20, 1993

The weaker sex in academe

SIR—The discrepancy between the number of men and women on the academic staff at Oxford (report, May 19) is not simply due to the exercise of prejudice in the past.

Nowadays something over 40 per cent of undergraduates are women but, in most subjects, they get little more than half as many Firsts as do men in proportion with their numbers. This means that for every woman placed in Class I there will be nearly three men.

At Oxford, 27.1 per cent of Colleges and University Fund lecturers are women, which is perhaps not too bad, though they make up a mere 7.4 per cent of Readers and 5.1 per cent of Professors.

However, the women who are now eligible for Readerships and Professorships will have graduated at least 20 years ago, when the proportion of women undergraduates was much lower, though it is true that their average academic performance was then better than it is now, by comparison with the men.

Although a problem exists here, the fact that men and women are still far from equality in higher academic appointments at Oxford — which ought to be made strictly on merit — is not necessarily evidence of sex discrimination, as alleged.

Marriage and child-rearing are indeed more of a handicap for women academics than for men, and everything possible should be done to minimise this.

The real problem seems to be the present relatively low representation of women at the top of the Class Lists. This may not be so easy to deal with.

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18 MONDAY, MAY 24, 1993

How women could win more firsts

SIR—Dr Goodhart (letter, May 20) pointed out that the discrepancy between the number of men and women on the academic staff at Oxford (report, May 19) is not just a reflection of prejudice in the past; but he did not suggest why women graduates are being awarded fewer first class degrees than their male counterparts.

Ten years ago I conducted a study of four university departments. Systematic sex bias in marking of undergraduate projects was demonstrated. The main effect was the undervaluing of the work of women at the top end of the marking distribution. This study was published and received national radio and newspaper coverage. But it was eight years before anyone published an attempted replication of the study. This would be understandable if most universities had effective systems of anonymous double marking in operation but this was not, and is not the case.

Some university departments allocate examination numbers to students for use on their exam scripts rather than names. However, anonymity is not always preserved. All too often, any attempt to preserve anonymity and protect against sex bias is abandoned before the final examiners' meeting where the final judgements of all are made.

Anonymous marking is an essential first step towards eliminating sex bias in assessment but is one that many university departments have yet to take.

To understand and redress the imbalance of the sexes in senior positions at Oxford and elsewhere we should investigate and change the procedures of examination, selection, appointment and promotion throughout academe.

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