

Closing the gender gap in academic research



Over the past few decades, the number of women obtaining degrees and PhDs has grown considerably. Despite gains in education, women remain underrepresented in research and leadership roles within higher education institutions. Professor Amitabh Anand shares how mentoring can help female academics gain the necessary knowledge, skills and connections to move forward in their research careers.

“Mentoring should not only help women achieve their career ambitions, but also transform society”

Dr Amitabh Anand is Assistant Professor of International Management at the SKEMA Business School, Université Côte d’Azur, GREDEG, in France. He obtained a BSc in Engineering from Visvesvaraya Technological University, Karnataka, India, an MBA from Stockholm University, Sweden, and a PhD in Management Science from NEOMA Business School, Paris, France. During his PhD journey and work in many academic institutions across the world, he observed how female academics struggled more than their male counterparts to forge successful research careers. Keen to support them, he launched SKARP (Sharing knowledge and research with pleasure), a global networking group that encourages male and female academics to share knowledge, data, reviews and invites to events. In particular, the group helps female academics overcome barriers within academia and progress their research projects.

Can you tell us a little about your initiative SKARP and how it supports female academics?

SKARP involves many eminent scholars from all across the globe. It’s a group for male and female academics to share knowledge with pleasure, with the simple reward of gratitude. Within this network and even outside, me and a few of my colleagues help in supporting female scholars – we provide friendly reviews, connections with experts on specific research, help in data collection, share invites to conduct workshops or propose conference talks and presentations. Anyone is welcome to join the group.

Beyond SKARP, you actively look for opportunities to help women publish their research and climb the academic ladder. How has your support impacted their careers?

In one instance, I wanted an expert opinion on one of my projects and this led me to collaborate with a female scholar, who helped me finish the project and get the paper published. This was the first publication she had in nearly six years, as she wasn't aware of strong networks and her work portfolio didn't allow her much time to get into research. Having now instilled the research spirit in her, we are working on various projects, and not just that, I was able to help her collaborate and work on many interesting projects with others too. So, I think the first step is identifying those who need projects, matching their expertise and involving them or connecting them to projects.

In another example, I supervised two female Masters programme students which resulted in them winning a travel grant competition to Russia. Furthermore, their research was published in a peer-reviewed journal. I also helped a female scholar from Italy who wanted support with her thesis. During her stay, I helped her finish her thesis and condense it into a book chapter, which is now under review for publication.

When I see a little potential, I take initiatives to open many avenues to support and motivate female scholars to research and publish. Throughout my career, articles that I have published, or papers that I presented in conferences, have always included at least one female scholar – I'm sure, if everyone does this, there will be gender balance in academic and scholarly publishing.

How difficult is it for female academics to find a mentor and how can these challenges be solved?

I wouldn't say it's completely difficult as the world is advancing and we see many global gender initiatives. However, I feel there are some challenges around finding a mentor. I think every institution should provide a mentor connect programme that includes female scholars. In a few private universities in India, I have advised that PhD or Postdoc students should have one module that requires male and female scholars to work together and present the joint project at a conference or publish the work in a book chapter. So far, I have seen this initiative progressing well in conference participation, but the outcome is yet to be seen in publications, since it's still ongoing.

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Have you faced any barriers in mentoring female academics?

So far, I have not faced any challenges as I have mentored many Masters students. As an external advisor to PhD students and early stage scholars across the globe, I think they have challenges in managing the work-life balance. I think women in general have many responsibilities during their career such as children, family, or other life issues. In such situations, I personally have faced emotional challenges such as managing time and deadlines, and at times things have progressed slowly. To overcome these situations, I keep my mentees motivated and give them the freedom to choose the work and deadlines, and in most cases, it has worked very well for me.

Research shows that less women reach senior roles in academia despite making up 45% of the workforce – why do you think this is the case?

I think this depends on many contextual factors such as the country, culture and government policies. At one time, women in many emerging nations didn't even have the chance to work, let alone progress to senior positions. However, over the last decade the number of working women has increased a lot. But reaching a senior role depends on various factors, such as experience, temperament, politics, lobbying and facing challenges at every step. I believe that organisations should have policies that give women the opportunity to work in senior roles. They could perhaps have a mentoring programme that identifies, motivates and transforms women to become leaders.

What role does mentoring play in helping women in academia achieve their career ambitions?

I think mentoring should not only help women achieve their career ambitions, but also transform society. Mentoring activities can help female academics overcome stress (e.g. the publish and perish syndrome), face failures (e.g. grant rejections or rejected publications), transform teaching (e.g. teach values ethics along with subjects), deal with people and network (e.g. conferences, events, summits etc.), and follow their dreams (e.g. to do/not do a postdoc or apply for positions, where to publish and where not to etc.).

How should publishers support the progression of female scholars?

I feel publishers have a major role to play. For instance, publishers can encourage journal editors-in-chief to propose special issues that require all submitted papers to have at least one female co-author. They should also dedicate an issue inviting female-only authors to submit articles. Similarly, they can do the same for book chapters or book proposals. Publishers should provide virtual mentoring and online mentoring programmes. They should propose a platform to female scholars to shoot ideas and connect with people within the publisher’s journals or books. Publishers can have a dedicated section such as ‘female scholars connect’ or ‘resources for female scholars’ and provide all necessary information or ask them to share challenges that can be addressed in future.

What advice would you give to someone starting a career in academia?

I think every academic should be powered with humility, driven by generosity and share knowledge unconditionally. These characteristics will help them grow, collaborate, learn and achieve their goals not just in academia, but in every aspect of life.

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A network that mentors

SKARP is more than a networking group, it follows a collaborative and mentoring ethos that helps female academics gain confidence, knowledge and skills in research and publishing. The platform also promotes information sharing such as calls for papers, events and articles.

“SKARP as a network provides both male and female researchers with opportunities to collaborate together and share innovative ideas,” says one female member. Another describes how a small discussion within SKARP led to a conference paper and later a paper in a top journal (currently under review).



Profile

Dr Amitabh Anand is Assistant Professor at the Digitalisation Academy, SKEMA Business School, Université Côte d’Azur, GREDEG, France. He has won several awards in research: ‘Excellence in Peer Review’ from South Asian Journal of Human Resources Management, ‘Emerging Scholar Award’ from the Organization Studies Research Network in Germany and ‘Young Distinguished Educator Award’ from Discovery Edu-Media, Delhi, India. For his contribution to teaching and impact on student learning, he featured within Poets & Quants ‘Top 50 World’s Best Undergraduate Professors’, among 400 global nominations. He is a member of the European Academy of Management and a founding member of the Sharing Knowledge Forward Initiative SKARP (Sharing Knowledge and Research with Pleasure), which involves a group of professors on a mission to share knowledge unconditionally across the globe. He is also part of the editorial advisory/review board of many peer-reviewed ranked journals and worked in the capacity of guest editor for open access journals.