

Transcript for 'Inside WIMM: Women in Leadership'

Host: Welcome to the Inside WIMM podcast, the people behind the science at the MRC Weatherall Institute of Molecular Medicine at the University of Oxford; an institute we affectionately know as the WIMM. In this episode we are exploring leadership development across the institute. The latest cohort of the WIMM Women in Leadership programme have just completed their course so I sat down with some of the participants to learn more about why they took part, what it involved, and what they are taking away from programme moving forward. Let's meet them.

Sarah: Hello my name's Sarah Gooding I am a post-doc clinician scientist here in the WIMM. I'm in Ross Chapman's group. I'm also a consultant in the NHS and I work on multiple myeloma.

Danielle: Hello, my name is Dr Daniel Wellington. I previously was a post doc for six years with Professor Tao Dong at the Weatherall institute and I recently moved over to the CAMS Oxford Institute in NDM and I'm now a training programmes coordinator.

Rong: Hello I'm Rong Li, I'm a postdoc from Beth Psailas group and Tao Dongs group based in the WIMM. I'm working on myelofibrosis. Last year I also got my postdoc fellow funding from the CAMS Oxford Institute to continue my research.

Giulia: OK so I'm Giulia and I'm a post-doc in the Mead lab here at the WIMM and I am also a Fellow so I've also got some funding to run some the research from Leukaemia UK which has been very helpful.

Host: And we also meet Catherine Porcher, Associate Professor of developmental and stem cell biology, who helped to develop the programme.

Catherine: So, I'm Catherine Porcher, I've been a group leader here the WIMM for a long time and I run a science research group and I'm very, very keen into helping young scientists and see how we can best help them to develop their talents.

Host: The WIMM Women in Leadership programme engaged with postdoctoral researchers based at the WIMM; a time when many are focused on shaping their career path.

Sarah: This is a job where career progression is hard, you know, it's difficult to work out what sort of future you might like in science. Whether you want to try and stay an academic, go to industry, move to something else completely, it is very competitive.

Giulia: I think there are different challenges for women to get to a leadership position compared for instance for men, so I think a targeted the programme that targets those gender differences is really important, to try to achieve a balance between what is the outcome of that, which is you know becoming a PI which we still know is heavily biased towards men, and so trying to understand what are the barriers, and trying to put in place what we can do to overcome those barriers I think it's really, really important.

Catherine: So a few years back ,and that was also part of our aim to identify how best to support our young scientists, we decided with a few other PIs in the WIMM to run a wide consultation and focus group meetings and some of them specifically directed at female postdoctoral scientists and it was striking that very quickly we could observe amongst many of these young female scientists a lack of confidence, a feeling of self-doubt, but also a very strong desire to share experiences and to support each other. So, we then decided to try and equip these motivated and, I have to say, very talented women scientists who were often at a turning point in their career, with tools that would help them

build their confidence and leadership skills, and thus provide them and support them to step into senior roles.

We thought that providing an in-house training programme was probably the best way to do it rather than sending our postdocs to outside of the WIMM, so we appointed a professional facilitator, Milly Sinclair, who organised a series of personal and professional development workshops and these were also combined with peer coaching, and all took place here at the WIMM. The aim of the programme was for the participants to identify their core strengths and values and how to lead from them, and to understand what could hold them back (I think that was something that was quite important), and of course to develop a set of essential skills such as communication, negotiation, how to give and receive feedback and so on. But behind all these the idea was also to provide them with some protected time and a safe environment to think about their career which is something that actually if you think about it everyone at any stage in their career should be able to benefit from.

Sarah: Well so the whole thing is facilitated by Millie Sinclair who is fantastic, I can't sing her praises enough yeah, she's very good and she's very experienced in working with these sorts of groups. She has done a lot of work with scientists in the university so she really understands I think our careers and what the pressures are.

Giulia: I think, first of all, I thought it was going to be very passive and it was very active type of session. Secondly, every time I think after maybe two, I was like I'm sure this time I'm not going to find it as interesting as I was the one before. Wrong. Because she managed to always tackle different issue and therefore every bit of the programme. I just wish that times I had a camera and I could just record what was happening because the feeling was just very inspiring and so yeah more passive and instead it was very active.

Sarah: It was spread over four months and we had a series of either whole afternoon or full day sessions, I think maybe two full day sessions or maybe about four afternoons, and then we also had two hourly sessions of individual coaching with Millie the facilitator as well. So it's a different a set of different things and each of those longer group sessions had particular themes addressing particular aspects of our career development and leadership training.

Giulia: I think it's also very important that the programme is not all in one week because it makes sense to have a programme like that is in six months, it's around six months, like once a month maybe we met, but then you have time to reflect, to take stuff in, and to maybe start already to make some improvements and to see how you feel and I think it makes sense it is completely different than having just a day or a week in which you just bombarded just makes your changes more likely to be enduring instead of just being a quick fix that goes away after the programme is done.

Catherine: I wanted to know if this format was working because they might have said the sessions are too far apart. But actually they thought it was really, really helpful because they could think in-between sessions about what they have learnt, and importantly talk to each other, help each other and they were they were put into buddies and they all have somebody to talk to talk to as often as they wanted, to practise some skills and then when they were coming to the next session they could talk about what they had learned before, and then just learn more about it. And so, the format has worked really well I have learned about it by just talking to these lovely women.

Host: The programme allowed those taking part to reflect and process their careers and their career options, and to explore different leadership styles.

Sarah: There is a life coaching element to this course, particularly in the sessions where you have one-on-one with Millie, where you think about what your own career goals are and how you might decide between a range of different career goals and what you might need to change or instigate to get to your career goals. I mean that's in a sense I guess basic life coaching, but there isn't much opportunity for that in academic science so I find it extremely helpful I haven't had that opportunity before.

Giulia: Yeah, I think it is a point in which is start thinking if you really want to go ahead with this career becoming a group leader, or if you want to maybe change, so I think it's an important time to understand where you are, and if you are ready to get the next step which is very different from what you've done until now because postdoc and PI are very different positions.

Danielle: Yeah, so I think...and this is the same for men and women... I think the career that path that we've chosen is really difficult. It is a difficult path it requires a lot of resilience to stay on it and it you get into this mindset of all I know how to do it research, I don't know how to do anything else, I don't know how to apply for anything else I don't know what other sectors or industries are looking for, and I think having a course like this helps you first realised that everybody else is feeling the same, and so you're not alone in thinking that, and also just coming to terms with the fact that it's not failure to leave. Everybody has to move on at some point people and not everybody can stay in academia, there's not the room, there's not the funding and I think having courses like this allow you to explore those other avenues.

Rong: Before I joined this programme, I thought I'm probably not ready at all and I'm not that confident I can be a PI in the future. Before I joined this programme I thought OK, I'm probably still very far from that. After I joined this programme right after the whole programme I thought OK, probably what I did before it already has some preparation for that. And also, by getting together in this programme we can have like a small community we can support each other.

Danielle: Yeah so, the first session was about leading yourself and that was really useful to find out what type of leader you are. I didn't really know that there was necessarily different types of leaders but I found out that I'm a lover, so I care about the people that I was managing. I care about the people I'm leading and I want to make sure that they are all doing OK and fulfilling their potential. The other sorts of leaders are 'Monarchs' who are the regal type who are at the head of everything and just oversee everything, or the 'warriors' who will get go into battle for you, and things like that and so I have those aspects in me, but I think I would more be like to be on the sort of friendly, collegiate side of leadership. I want you to know why you're doing it and I want you to feel like by doing what I'm asking you are contributing to the team or the group or whatever thing we are doing.

Host: Something that came through in all of the interviews was how building **these** leadership skills impacted more than just leadership roles.

Giulia: I think it was lovely. I think it's such a rounded programme that you know influences I think your relationship with your boss, but also your relationship with your colleagues, and all you can handle those relationships, so that's why it feels very rounded and life changing. Your relationship with your partner in terms of how to ask for help for instance, so there were different skills. As you said, leadership is not just about saying to people what they need to do for you but it's also trying to maintain a balance and trying to be able to get the right support to know what is the right support to know how to get the right support, and to be able to communicate with people in a positive way. So I think those ones were the surprising skills. I don't think they always go in that box of what leadership really means. And for women it's different because women tend not to ask for help, or

they tend to take too much on themselves, and at times can be detrimental maybe for going forward. So yeah it was they said it was rounded because you know it's not only about what you do when you're a leader, but also how to relate with people around you with whatever it is if it's above, your peer, or in your personal life.

Sarah: All of us could handle things better I think, it you know, even if even if we're great leaders or we're interpersonally normally find things OK, all of us have situations that are stressful and difficult and it was really good at digging into those, and working out why, and analysing your own behaviour and coming up with strategies to handle things better, I think that was really good.

Dannielle: Other than that it was probably more about how to have difficult conversations and that you know even I've been in this job for four weeks now and I've already had to facilitate a difficult conversation between a DPhil student and their supervisors and so that was really really useful just to know to sort of advise the supervisors about how to have the conversation in the first place I was able to help them with that, and then also just support the student in terms of what to expect in the conversation, and then at the end helping to sort of sum everything up and bring everything together for everyone so I think that was you know a really brilliant skill being able to have those difficult conversations.

Host: I wanted to see more about the experience joining a sustained project with people from across the WIMM.

Giulia: I think one of the things that Milly is really good at, and the programme is really good at, that if really feels like it's for everyone actually and she's really good at tailoring, you know, all of us made different comments and come from different backgrounds, but somehow the way she would run the programme that will make us feel welcome so it's totally for everyone and more especially if you feel it is not for you I think it's probably more for you. So yeah that's what I would say is yes, it is very open for everyone yeah.

Sarah: You're among colleagues who are in a very similar place to you. It was actually brilliant to get to know the other people on the course better. You know they're all faces I see around the WIMM. Some of them were people I knew well already, many of them weren't especially because this course that we particularly did was at the end of the you know after two years of COVID lockdown and so there's always a fair amount of staff changeover and there were people there who I'd never met before, and it was actually really good to have a safe space in which to talk about how people had struggled during the lockdown as well. That was a whole other element that came into this course, I think that's really valuable people on the course.

Rong: And Milly also encouraged us, like two people can set up like a small group and we can chat time by time catch up and like me, I usually have a chat with Charlie so I think it's quite a good opportunity for us to communicate after the programme and also chat about our work and life, and get some spot from each other.

Dannielle: People were applying for things. One person got a fellowship and we all celebrated as a group you know, you become this group. You see what people's dreams are, what their next steps are and say when you see them achieve it although you see them getting a step closer you know you all feel happy for that person, we're all now behind each other's dreams and aspirations and it's having like a little cheerleading pack behind you pushing you along those next steps.

Host: The Women in Leadership programme first ran in 2019 with the second cohort finishing in 2022. This most recent course included an additional session welcoming people from across the WIMM.

Rong: Yes, I think there are most interesting part for our, for this time is the last session where the women and men get together have like a communal discussion and to say like what we thought, what others feedback not only focused on women so I think that is very interesting.

Giulia: Yeah, in the last parts of the programme involved women and men coming together and trying to involve man in this conversation on how we can bring a change to help women reaching leadership positions and I think there was a new bit we hadn't done before and it was very, very successful and it was interesting to see the other side.

Catherine: So what we were trying to achieve with this last session that we've called 'Mind the Gap' was to open the discussion to everybody in the institute. So we were trying to gather in a room for a few hours students, postdocs, PIs, research assistant, to talk about something that is quite important to us which is this line again session an it's been really good in the sense that although we didn't have all the representation we wanted from all the levels of scientists within the WIMM, we did have a mixed audience and we had engagement from everybody who was there in the discussion, in bringing ideas and and also we have people who would have never met otherwise. So I think it's been really good to discuss about this important topic which is how to help women in science on lots of different aspects but also for people to get to know each other, to just mingle, and we are planning on having other sessions like this one to discuss basically as a forum for discussion about things that are important for people who work at the WIMM.

Host: I wanted to hear more about the value and legacy of the programme.

Catherine: Scientists, of course they have to be at the bench, of course they have to do their science, but it's good also sometimes to step out of the lab, to have a little bit of time to think and also to just learn new skills who are going to help not only people personally, but also help them work in a better way in the lab. If they're happy, if they understand the meaning of what they are doing in terms of career progression, so actually talking to other people and discussing these things shouldn't be difficult because there are obvious benefits.

Sarah: The life skills that we covered are useful to everyone. You know, we all lead in some setting or other, whether it's leading a discussion in a journal club, or you know, line managing members of staff, these skills are universal.

Giulia: I think for me, the programme was inspiring and I think life-changing in terms of the skills that it would give me in the future, so I felt very, very, very different after yeah so inspiring would be the word that come to my mind that I'd describe it.

Catherine: They have created a network of women who are very supportive of each other and keep talking to each other but also can reach out to the rest of their peers across the institute so it not only benefits individuals but it also benefits the whole of the institute. It's important and it's also quite unique because if people go outside of their institute to attend such programmes there would be maybe 1, 2, of them doing it at the same time, but not 12. So then they come back and maybe they cannot achieve what our women here are able to achieve.

Host: I asked what they would say to other postdocs in them he was thinking of applying to this programme.

Dannielle I would say do it. I mean this course was the most useful course that I did in my time as a postdoc and I signed up to a lot of courses I you know I tried as much as I could to get the most out of the university offerings that there were but this one it will change the way you think more than anything it's not it's not training it's not it's not trying to tell you how to do anything it is about thinking it's about showing you how you think, and it's about changing the way that you think to make yourself more successful and more confident to step into the things that you want to do.

Rong: For the people who ask me I will just share my real feeling and is really a very amazing one you don't need to spend it won't take you to long time for this is just just as Giulia just mentioned we met like one once maxim once per month and you also can get good connexions with the colleagues in this building not only in your lab and I think most important thing that this is not only aimed for the people who only want to be leader in the future.

Probably even better for the next session they including both men and women for our next session on leadership I think this is a very good point.

Giulia: Yeah.

Catherine: Because this programme has been so well received and obviously has helped many of our young scientists the plan now is to offer it on an annual basis and to try and reach as many postdoc scientists as possible. But now while supporting women in science is essential for the reasons I have already mentioned and hopefully maybe longer future to help close the gender gap in senior academic positions, we are also fully aware that this should not just be restricted to women but that men could also tremendously benefit from this course. So this year we have decided to open the programme to both men and women and we will run mixed sessions as well as gender specific sessions and discuss how men and women can best support each other in their journey. And another idea that we are currently developing is to organise sessions for junior PIs to help them in their new supervision and managerial roles and then one thing I also would like to stress is that we are very keen here at the institute to support diversity in all its shapes and we are now making every effort to motivate everyone irrespective of not only their gender but also their background or their aspirations to participate in our training programme.

Host: This has been Inside WIMM. If you like the podcast please subscribe, like, or review.