This exhibition focuses on celebrating women who work in research, and who are good female role models for those aspiring to be researchers, or are already working in this area.

The women in this exhibition represent just a small selection of the fantastic women we have working in different areas of research at different levels across the whole of the University of Reading. It is hoped that their stories will inspire others, and show how they have coped with the challenges and rewards which come with this type of career.
Philippa Heath is a PhD student both in the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences and the Department of Food and Nutritional Sciences. Working in the field of developmental psychology, she examines infants’ eating behaviours. Philippa has four teenage children.

‘I used to be a solicitor, but it didn’t fit in with my aspirations for a balanced family life as I wanted to be at home more with the children. I still felt I wanted some intellectual stimulation, so worked for a while as the chief executive of a counselling charity, which stimulated my interest in psychology. I did a psychology conversion course, and that has led me to doing my PhD here at Reading.

It works well for me – it’s hard work, but Reading is brilliant and extremely friendly. My supervisors are very supportive, as are my family – I have been very lucky.

There are challenges. It’s a juggling act, but any mother in any line of work will always be juggling. It’s important to remember that you can’t be everywhere at once. Research is very flexible, so although you still need to get your work done, you can fit it around the lifestyle you need to lead as a mother. For instance, I can take most of my holiday during the school holidays, which is great for my family.

Research is exciting – you never know where it will take you next, and that is why I love it. It takes a particular type of person, as it is a huge commitment, but it can be done and you can achieve a good work-life balance.’
Professor Julie Lovegrove works in nutritional science in the Department of Food and Nutritional Sciences. She has two teenage children.

“My research interests focus on the impact of diet and lifestyle on cardiovascular disease risk. I’m fortunate that my work spans a variety of inter-related activities, from basic research through teaching, to service on national committees that advise government on nutritional policy.

I’ve always been passionate about science, and whilst I enjoyed my early career as a clinical dietitian, my desire to understand the role of nutrition in human health and disease led to a PhD and career in biomedical research.

I have two children, a daughter 16, and son 14, and worked part-time for 10 years to give me time with them as they were growing up. My professional life provides an exciting challenge, but can impose demands on my time that conflict with family commitments. Dealing with this can be a juggling act, particularly when faced with an early appointment at work and the school run or a sick child. It has required flexibility, compromise, and close support from my family and friends. In this respect, perhaps my children would be the best to comment as to whether I’ve achieved the right balance!

I would strongly encourage women considering research to follow their instincts. A fulfilling career can have mutual benefits for you and your family. It has made me value the time we spend together, and hopefully inspired an interest in science that will help my children to understand the world around them.”
Noor Mat Nayan is a PhD student in applied linguistics. She is originally from Malaysia, and came to Reading to do her PhD as a single mother of two boys aged 15 and 11.

‘I brought my two boys here with me to do my PhD, which was a challenge as there was a lot of pressure from my family to leave them behind in Malaysia, but I couldn’t. When we moved, they were aged about 11 and 8. It was tough, as I was a single mum at the time, and you have to take the role of mum and dad – so you have to manage everything on your own as well as trying to focus on your PhD.

Juggling full parental responsibility with a full-time PhD is not easy – it’s tiring and challenging, but I’d rather be busy than away from my children. Now that my children are older, I can work longer hours. I’ve also recently got married again, and this helps as I have a bit more support at home.

I live with a chronic medical condition, which means I have to be especially aware of my health, and look after myself properly. I have to be careful of physical and mental fatigue, and know my limits, so finding a balance between my work and wellbeing is especially important. Essentially, I think what keeps me going is the excitement of learning and discovering new things in my research area. You need to be passionate and love what you do – you shouldn’t just do a PhD because you have to. A PhD will not just challenge your intellect but also test your inner strength. Discipline, perseverance and determination are crucial qualities. At the same time, you also need to have a lot of common sense and be realistic. All this helps me to cope with the challenges that having a family and doing a PhD throw at me. It is tough, but I’m enjoying it.’
Professor Yelena Kalyuzhnova from the Centre for Euro-Asian Studies works in the area of energy economics. She is originally from Kazakhstan and is mother to a young son.

‘Energy Economics (oil and gas in particular) is seen as a man’s world, and it is quite challenging to advance a career in this field. My husband is an engineer and he advised me not to be one of those researchers who does no field research; I write about actual things that I have seen with my own eyes and this strengthens my ability to work in several different areas.

When my son was born, people expected me to give up or slow down my career. I found instead that he is the driving force behind me now - I think that it is important not only to be a mum, but to also be an advisor and an inspiration to my child. I find myself using experiences in the workplace, such as the mentoring of students, to reflect and adapt how I shape my son’s development, and this in turn impacts on the changes I make to the courses I teach.

Women need determination in pursuing their careers, which I get from the support of my family. You also need to be devoted to a career in research, but you must remember to maintain a balance. My advice to other women would be to make sure they keep a balance between career and family, keep their priorities straight, and to believe in themselves. Always be sure to follow your dreams; we gave our son a card on his first birthday saying just this.’
Women in research

Professor Sue Walker from the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication undertakes research in the analysis and description of graphic language, and in the history, theory and practice of information design. She has held a number of senior positions within the University, most recently as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. She has five children and is a partner in the design consultancy, Text Matters.

‘My most recent role has been in senior management, which has meant that I have had the opportunity to learn about other colleagues’ research, and to support them in this; I’ve done a lot of work with women at different stages in their career and who want to advance further. My advice is to be ambitious, to take risks, and be prepared to work collaboratively with other researchers – a skill that women often utilise more successfully than men.

I was a student at Reading, did my PhD here, and then worked as a part-time lecturer in Typography before eventually going on to become a full-time academic in 1997 when I became Head of Department. Working part-time was important: first, I believed that to effectively teach design I needed to practise as a designer, and secondly, having five children between 1985–1993, meant I wanted to combine family life with being an academic. I have a very supportive husband, and when the children were young we had extremely good child-care. Living close to the University helped too because I could be very flexible about fitting my work around the children’s day.

I think one of the main challenges for women in higher education is having the confidence to take on leadership roles, especially given institutional hierarchies where it seems that men are favoured. It can be very intimidating working in a male-dominated environment, and women need to be encouraged to have confidence in discussing their ideas, their ways of working and their ambitions.

The best advice I could give to other women pursuing a career in research is to go for it! For me it has been important to be flexible, to be organised and to keep calm. In keeping a reasonable work-life balance you need to find a system that works for you, and that provides the ‘head space’ that you need: when my children were young I often got up at 5am in order to have peaceful, productive time in which to think and write.’
Tharindu Liyanagunawardena is an international student at the University of Reading, studying for a PhD in computer science under a university studentship. She is from Sri Lanka and has toddler twins – a son and a daughter.

‘Research is interesting because it constantly opens up new ways of thinking. My own thoughts and opinions have broadened since I’ve started my studies here. I have quite a unique situation where I have to balance my research work with my toddler twins who were born during my second year of the PhD.

Giving birth to two underweight babies despite carrying them to term meant that I had to take extended maternity leave during my data collection in Sri Lanka. The University was extremely flexible about this, unlike most other employers. However, with the support from my family I managed to complete the data collection as planned.

The twins were only 11 months old when we brought them back to the UK. Luckily we found a nursery close to where we live, but initially as the language and environment was so different, the twins took a long time to settle.

Research in a university like this allows for flexible working hours, which helps me balance my work and caring duties. The twins attend nursery for three days and I look after them for the other two days. My husband takes over childcare duties at weekends, allowing me to work on my research. So I still get to work a five-day week.’
Dr Rebecca Bullard from the Department of English Language and Literature researches 17th and 18th century English literature, and has a particular interest in women writers. She has two young children.

“There are lots of challenges for women pursuing a career in research, but I would say the biggest is the long apprenticeship needed in order to establish one’s career in the first place. Researchers tend to finish their PhD in their late 20s when many women are thinking about having a family, establishing their career and getting their adult life underway. Women researchers in English are lucky as it is not a male-dominated discipline, so there is less institutional prejudice. Even so, the practicalities of maintaining the work-family balance are still difficult.

I find my work wonderfully flexible. My husband is an academic too, so this allows us to go home and be with the children but continue to work from home.

We have to stop seeing a compromise as a negative thing – it can be a good thing, in that it teaches our children that compromise is necessary in life. To be juggling three or four things successfully at once is a major achievement. Women have to look positively at the things they are managing to do, rather than focusing on the things I can’t do.”
Dr Paola Nasti works in the area of medieval literature and biblical traditions in the School of Literature and Languages and has two children aged 8 and 4. She is Italian and originally from Naples, having moved to the UK permanently in 1996.

‘I took my first job in Manchester, whilst finishing writing up my PhD which I had done at Reading, and I gave birth to my daughter within 6 months of starting. I spent a few years there, then came back to Reading. As I was the only woman in the Manchester department with a family I found it quite isolating with little support from colleagues. I love the department here – it’s very prestigious, but also very welcoming. I have found that some women decide not to have more than one child as they feel it will ‘get in the way of research’. Research is seen as a life choice, which it can be if you completely devote yourself to it. In some places mothers are seen as abnormal, but I don’t feel like that here.

Accepting that I need help to look after my children and not feeling guilty about it is something that helps me to cope with the challenges of being a woman in research. I also accept that sometimes when I have a tight deadline I need to work in the evenings, rather than enjoy a nice meal with my husband! So, I choose what I do wisely and make the most of it and I realise that I can’t be everywhere at once!

Women shouldn’t feel that they have to make a choice between personal and family aspirations. It is important to look back on life with no regrets as research cannot always fulfil you completely.’
Professor Emma Borg is Head of the Department of Philosophy, and her research specialises in issues concerning mind and language. She has been at Reading for over 11 years, and has two children aged 7 and 4.

‘Academia is very male-dominated in general, and can be quite a difficult environment for a woman – mental images of academics are of middle-aged men with beards, and women are often very under-represented in the workplace.

Getting a permanent post is very significant for a woman, and I have been very lucky. However permanent posts in research are hard to find and this can make it difficult if you want to do things like buy a house and have children.

I’m just back from three months in America, where I had a visiting Professorship in Chicago. I took my children with me and they attended school over there, which was a great experience for them. It was daunting at first, but I’m glad we did it. The American city experience was really different for the kids and broadened their horizons, so I feel we were very fortunate to get the opportunity to do that.

My spare time is taken up with my children. It’s a busy life, but I feel I have the best of both worlds. Academia is good because you can organise your own time to an extent and the hours are fairly flexible.

My advice to other women thinking of a career in research, or those in research thinking of having a family, is that you should just go for it! There is never a perfect time to start a family, but children are pretty pliable and you can still achieve a lot in your career when you have them. Academia is a great job, and I couldn’t imagine doing anything else!’
Dr Beatrice Pelloni is Head of the Department of Mathematics and Statistics, and has recently been recognised as one of the leading female mathematicians in the world by her invitation to deliver the prestigious Olga-Taussky-Todd lecture at the International Congress on Industrial and Applied Mathematics. She has four children.

‘I think it’s difficult to readjust to a research routine. When all your waking hours are taken up with thinking about research, it’s hard to find that there are hours when you just have to shut off all your research thoughts. I was reckless in a sense – I had my children when I was very young; three of them before my PhD. So when I started my career, my focus already included my role as a mother.

This put me in a good position for work-life balancing. Extra work has always been done at home, and fitted in between other family things. The challenges aren’t scientific; I know many women scientists whose work is first rate by any standard. The issue is one of self-confidence, which I think affects women more than men. A big challenge is to be able to find a way to separate the time you give to work from the time you give to your family.

It’s difficult to take a complete break for a long time and then come back. For me to keep myself going, I found it helpful to work a little bit each day so that I didn’t feel completely out of the research community. I kept up with the news in my area, which was important for my professional interests. This keeps things fresh, and keeps your perspective of you as a professional person in the room at all times.

The advice I would give to other women is that when you feel you want to have a family, you shouldn’t let worries about the impact on your professional life put you off. But also, do not let yourself be put off by professional challenges because you have children. The key is in balancing your contributions, rather than sacrificing one part of your life as a whole person for the benefit of another part.’
Dr Thérèse Callus works on medical and family law in the School of Law. She has a 6-year-old daughter.

‘I’ve been at Reading since 2002, teaching and researching. I initially started working full-time hours, and I have been working different degrees of part-time hours since I had my daughter.

I suppose one piece of advice I would give to other women is to not wait for the perfect moment to start a family – there is no such thing! However, when it happens, you do need to be willing to say ‘I won’t work for a while’. Pre-children, you can arrange your life around the research. Balancing it with family is hard, because if ‘baby needs to be looked after’, then ‘baby needs to be looked after’, whether or not you have research to do.

A good support network is very useful – I had my mother, who has really helped and this has enabled me to work more flexibly.

The flexibility with research is an attraction, and although it is difficult to research ‘part-time’ – progress is inevitably slower – the research environment allows unconventional working hours which are adaptable. So it’s important to embrace the flexibility that research does give you. Also, remember that children do get older and become more autonomous, so it is possible to adjust your working patterns once they start school.’
Professor Catriona McKinnon works in the School of Politics, Economics and International Relations in the area of political theory and philosophy. She has two young children aged 2 and 4.

'I came to the University of Reading partly because of its reputation, and partly for personal reasons. I have a large number of family connections in London, and wanted to work somewhere a bit closer to them. I have two young children and I think when your children are youngest is the hardest time to be a working mum, especially as my husband also works full-time.

Having my children later in life fitted in well with my career in academia. Conferencing and networking are a vital part of a successful career in research, and having children later in my career meant I already had well-established connections before I went on maternity leave.

It can be quite daunting re-entering the workplace after maternity leave: there are many structural barriers for women. I think time management is perhaps the biggest challenge after having children as they force you to be creative and innovative with the structure of your day.

You have to be realistic and set achievable goals. A major challenge is when your children become ill: this has to take priority, but it results in a day’s work being sacrificed. You can’t get that time back. Luckily, my husband is extremely accommodating – without him I would be limited in my ability to keep a balance between work and home.

Organisation is the key to having the best of both worlds, micro-managing your time at home in particular. We have two academic wall planners at home, which means we know exactly who is committed to what on any given day.'
Dr Tabarak Ballal is interested in computational applications within the management and the organisation of engineering design and construction projects. She works in the School of Construction Management and Engineering, and has three children.

'I love what I do, and that drives me in life. I have three children, so it’s not been easy trying to balance life with work responsibilities; I think you need commitment and motivation to keep going.

I have had a good childcare structure around me, which has helped a lot. I have a very supportive husband as well, which I think makes a huge difference to a woman’s life. In the past, when I have occasionally had to work away from home, such as to attend conferences, my husband has been able to support me in this.

There are many different challenges at different levels. The construction industry is very male-dominated and so women need to have a lot of determination to be seen as a capable professional. I have colleagues who have sacrificed their private life in order to progress their career – I don’t think that is right. Life is about keeping a balance and prioritising.

Having a passion for research helps you to overcome the different hurdles and challenges you come up against. My advice to other women would be to believe in yourself as an achiever. Having a supportive family and understanding children is especially important too.'
'I think one of the key attractions for women in academia is that academic research is still relatively flexible, which can help promote a positive work-life balance. Also, I like working with students and young people – they are very inspirational. When you discover something new it is such a wonderful moment and I love to share that with other people. Structural biologists by nature, are collaborative and working people at the interface of chemistry and biology. Using cutting edge technologies, is very exciting and rewarding.

I think female role models and mentors are important. Throughout my career I’ve been fortunate to gain inspiration from primarily other women in my field – in fact, all of my academic supervisors have been female. It’s important to share experiences of difficulties in the workplace and discuss various strategies for overcoming the challenges that particularly women may face. I think schemes supporting women that challenge processes and educate co-workers and organisations are crucially important. I am a strong supporter of women’s networks. Women supporting women is very important, and we can use these support networks to challenge the system in a very constructive way.

I’m married and I have an 8-year-old son. I waited until quite late to start a family, as my career came first for a long time. Because we waited, I think my husband and I are quite laid back as parents and we manage to juggle our schedules and family time reasonably well. We even find time to pursue hobbies. We all do Tae Kwon Do together, and occasion-ally I find some quiet time on my own for painting and Pilates. That said, it’s a challenge to juggle family and work!

My advice is don’t wait, as there is no right or wrong time for anything. It all can be made possible with a committed approach, positive frame of mind and exten-sive network of support.'
Dr Marina Della Giusta is a behavioural economist in the School of Politics, Economics and International Relations. She is Italian and has a 5-year-old daughter.

‘Although I am Italian, professionally I consider myself home-grown Reading. I did my PhD here and stayed in the department afterwards because I think it is a great place to be. I share the care of my daughter with her father pretty evenly, and I think this has helped to make her a very balanced and happy child. One thing I am proud of is that she expects men to be able to care for her in the same way as women.

I love my job, and I couldn't give that up. I think that there are challenges in the way society and particularly the labour market are set up though. It’s often a straight trade-off between parents’, and particularly mothers’, wellbeing and the wellbeing of children and it should not be so; children are a whole society’s investment into its own future.

However, academia is a very privileged environment in that many women are able to make flexible working arrangements, so long as they are willing and able to have children once they have set up their career.

I am lucky. In my department there are now a good proportion of women and men who understand the challenges of combining career and family. Women should acknowledge the challenges, but not see them as their problem alone.

Research is amazingly fun – it’s a great job. It’s wonderful to be able to do what you want as long as it is relevant, and so job satisfaction is very high. There are obstacles, like with everything else, but in general I think we are a lucky lot.’
Women in research

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