FOOTSTEPS: A JOURNEY IN SCIENCE

Profiles of Staff in the Faculty of Engineering

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
The Athena SWAN charter, established in 2005, recognises commitment to the advancement of gender equality in HE, encompassing representation, progression and success for all.

It gives me enormous pleasure and great pride to introduce this brochure presenting profiles of a selection of my colleagues working in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Leeds. The success of any organisation is dependent on the people who work within it and there can be no doubt that the many successes of the Faculty of Engineering - in terms of education, research and impact - are all down to the individuals and teams that define us. In selecting the profiles that follow we have attempted to present a cross-section of the Faculty and to celebrate the range of backgrounds and experiences that are represented within it. In reading the profiles myself I have learned many things about my colleagues that I was unaware of, but I have also seen a number of important recurring themes such as the satisfaction gained from working with great colleagues and students, the importance of role models, the value of the right work-life balance and the variety that comes with the job. As a Faculty we seek to support all of our staff to achieve their professional ambitions in a manner that respects these themes as well as the many individual differences that make us a richer community. I hope that you will find this brochure as inspirational to read as I have!

Professor Peter Jimack
Dean of the Faculty of Engineering

I am delighted to see the first edition of our Footsteps brochure which showcases the diversity of our staff. The Footsteps initiative resulted from actions within our joint equality, inclusion and diversity strategy. It stemmed from Athena SWAN (which focuses on gender) and has now grown to involve a broad range of protected characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability). Athena SWAN in the Faculty of Engineering started in 2009, following our aspiration to provide inclusive working and learning environment where everybody feels welcome and equally supported to achieve their full potential.

With an initial focus on gender, we gained a deeper understanding of issues faced by both female and male staff and students, which laid the foundations of our Athena SWAN strategy (Bronze Award in 2013). Implementing a range of actions allowed us to address key issues and achieve the Athena SWAN Silver award in 2016.

Since our Silver award, our prime focus was on female representation across the whole pipeline providing support for the key transition points in the pipeline. We devised and implemented corresponding actions to address gender imbalances involving all student and staff categories, engaged students, staff and Faculty/School leadership in the co-creation of a series of activities for inclusive culture; and are engaging with external partners (university, region, private and public sector). We have now set aspirations to champion and promote our good practice in the University, Industry, and Sector and become a main driver for diverse engineering and computing.

We are grateful to our colleagues for sharing their stories providing inspiration and motivation to others. Special thanks go to Briony Thomas and Sandra Kitchingman for their passion and drive to shape the Faculty Footsteps initiative. We are looking forward to future editions, celebrating the diversity of our staff, students, and alumni.

Dr Vania Dimitrova
Faculty Chair of Athena SWAN

I am proud to work in a Faculty that is committed to all aspects of equality and promotes a culture where the diversity of our community is celebrated. In addition to our work to further gender equality, colleagues within the E&I/Athena Swan Committee have developed initiatives that include support for mental health and have organized and participated in events promoting Black History Month and LGBT in STEM. In response to student feedback our ‘Mutual Respect’ campaign promotes the positive message of our respectful learning environment and provides clear routes for reporting inappropriate behaviour. We will continue to actively seek and respond to feedback from staff and students in order to champion workplace equality and inclusion for all.

Dr Briony Thomas
Faculty E&I Co-ordinator
I am a Professor of Environmental Engineering for Buildings, and the Director of Research and Innovation in the School of Civil Engineering. My research and teaching is about indoor air quality - how you design a building that makes people healthy, happy and productive.

WHAT PURSUaded YOU TO CONTINUE IN ACADEMIA? I found that I could progress as there were opportunities at Leeds that appealed to me. Academia also offered flexibility and diversity. Most importantly, I enjoy what I am doing.

WHICH PARTS OF YOUR JOB DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST? I truly enjoy the variety of my role, and the fact that I learn something new every day. My research involves working with people from many different disciplines and I find that bringing different perspectives and techniques to a particular research challenge really exciting.

As I progressed I realised that I enjoy the leadership aspects of academia, and that has enabled me to take on school research leadership roles as well as Athena Swan. I particularly enjoy supporting students and early career researchers – it’s a great feeling when they have their first success.

WHO INFLUENCED YOUR CAREER CHOICE? My parents. My mum is a computer scientist, and my dad is an aircraft design engineer. I remember my mum teaching me the basics of computer programming when I was a child. I grew up with engineering and technology being the norm.

CAn YOU DESCRIBE HOW YOU’VE PROGRESSED WHILE AT LEEDS? I did my PhD in Mechanical Engineering followed by a research contract. I considered leaving academia, but then a postdoc opportunity arose in Civil Engineering. Although this was a change in research field, I discovered something I was really passionate about. I successfully applied for a Lectureship in 2007 and since have progressed through the University promotions.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARnt FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES, THE GOOD AND BAD ONES? I have learnt that there is not only one way for doing things. There isn’t a set of rules for being an academic and there is usually a way of making things happen – you just sometimes have to think about different solutions. I’ve also learnt to follow what makes you happy and drives your curiosity – although I haven’t yet learnt to say no!

ADVICE A short-term ambition is good. When deciding on a role model aim to choose someone who is a few years ahead of you, in order to benefit the most from the relationship. When you work in a team it is important to recognise other people’s needs and priorities – you gain so much more together when you allow flexibility in relation to personal circumstances.

I particularly enjoy supporting students and early career researchers – it’s a great feeling when they have their first success.
I started as a University Academic Fellow at Leeds in September 2015. 

CAN YOU DESCRIBE HOW YOU’VE PROGRESSED WHILE AT LEEDS? 

The change from postdoc to being an independent academic was a challenge, but I am quite happy with how things are going now. Most academics I met here at the university are very open, which made it easy to build collaborations. I have successfully completed my three-year review and have gained experience as a project PI and supervisor for PhD students. Also, I have created a new module for the MSc Advanced Mechanical Engineering which was a lot of work but was very rewarding. 

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO PURSUE AN ACADEMIC CAREER? 

I enjoy the intellectual challenge of tackling challenging problems with maths. It is a great feeling if a solution comes together and all the equations start to make sense. Working in academia gives you quite a bit of freedom in choosing what you work on. It also has a nice balance of teamwork and working for yourself. 

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST IN YOUR CAREER? 

A good and productive discussion with a bright colleague where I really learn something is always fantastic. This can be particularly fascinating when talking to researchers from another field, because it will make you look at things in a completely new way. Teaching students can also be very enjoyable, in particular when you are able to really get them to think in ways that they did not before. 

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES YOU’VE FACED? 

The lack of a clear career path as a postdoc was definitely a challenge. Currently, my biggest challenge is to balance time between work and being a dad – that requires a lot of optimisation in many ways. 

HOW DO YOU BALANCE THE DEMANDS OF WORK AND FAMILY LIFE? 

That is hard working as an academic. Because I bring our son to nursery in the morning and pick him up in the afternoon, I am more restricted in the times I can work during the day. I structure my work days quite rigidly and prioritise a lot. As much as possible I allocate time in my diary for all the important but non-urgent tasks, that need doing to keep on top of things, but that so easily fall by the wayside. Unfortunately, I am not always successful in keeping evenings and weekends free of work, but I try to keep out-of-hours work to a minimum. 

HOW HAS HR POLICY SUPPORTED YOU? 

I took almost half a year of shared parental leave after our son was born in February 2017. It was really fantastic to have that opportunity. When I mention that in playgroups to other dads, they very often reply how much they would have liked to do something like that but didn’t have the opportunity. Fortunately, as a University Academic Fellow in my second year, I was still on a reduced teaching load which made it relatively easy in terms of organisation. Also, the keep-in-touch days were useful because they allowed me to continue to supervise my PhD and project students. That way, it was also quite easy for me to transition back to working fully after my paternal leave ended. 

ADVICE 

Before starting as a UAF I read a lot of experiences of other academics who have been through tenure track. The one point that came up in every single one of those texts, no matter what discipline, was about how important it is to learn to say no – to others as well as to yourself. This advice was really useful to me and I’d definitely pass it on.

There are so many interesting things you could potentially do and if you try to do them all, you’ll never get anything done. 

WHAT WOULD WE BE SURPRISED TO KNOW ABOUT YOU? 

I don’t think that there are that many surprises about me. I am still a big fan of Heavy Metal music, but I am not sure if that is a surprise, really!
Diane Cochrane

1989: Technician, School of Materials, University of Leeds
1996: Fellow of Royal Microscopical Society
1998: Women in Technology Prize
2000: Licentiateship Materials Engineering
2003: Maternity leave and part-time on return to work (0.6 FTE)
2007: Lead Technician, School of Chemical and Process Engineering
2012: Contract change to 0.9 FTE

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR CAREER PROGRESSION?
My interest in laboratory work started when I was about 12. My father used to take me into his work at Rockware Glass on a Saturday morning. I used to help out in the glass testing and analysis labs. In high school, I arranged my own work experience in the laboratories at Ferrybridge C power station. This was supposed to be for one week however, due to my interest, they let me stay for a month. I enjoyed the testing, analysis and problem-solving.

After leaving sixth form, I got a job in the laboratories at King’s Mills flour mill. Over the next six years, I progressed to Assistant Mill Chemist before everyone was made redundant due to a fire. I was devastated but my father reassured me that I would get something else, which I did. I joined the University of Leeds in May 1989. I was the first female technician in the School of Materials. The first six years were a steep learning curve, learning all about Materials Science and technical photography from experienced technicians and attending college.

Thirty years on and I am now a Lead Technician managing a team of six technicians and 22 laboratories.

WHO INSPIRED YOUR CAREER?
My dad gave me direction and greatly influenced who I am today. I believe I inherited his ‘can do’ attitude.

WHAT PARTS OF YOUR JOB DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST?
That no two days are ever the same. I particularly enjoy the class interaction with undergraduates and working with researchers, especially in microstructural preparation and microscopy. I also enjoy working on the Schools Open days, outreach and work experience programmes.

HOW DID THE WORK ENVIRONMENT IN THE FACULTY HELP WITH YOUR CAREER DEVELOPMENT?
I have worked with some good line managers, colleagues and Heads of School with whose support I gained two HNCs in Materials Engineering and Technical Photography. I won the Technician of the Year for The Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining (IOM3) and the Women in Technology award for Materials, Minerals and Mining (IOM3) and Technical Photography. I won the Technician of the Year for The Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining (IOM3) and the Women in Technology award for the Castleford Ambulance Service. They were fund raising to buy defibrillators for two of their five ambulances as their staff were not trained to deal with cardiac arrest.

A few years later I attended a Springboard course which I found very interesting. Since then I have been involved in the Athena Swan programme and attend the Women in Science, Engineering and Technology meetings. I have also undertaken many University health and safety, management and CPD courses. I believe these have made me a rounded manager.

HOW HAVE YOU FOUND RETURNING TO WORK FROM MATERNITY LEAVE?
The Faculty was very flexible and allowed me to return to work part time and gradually increase my FTE. This helped greatly with my work life balance.

HOW DO YOU ACHIEVE BALANCE BETWEEN YOUR WORK AND PERSONAL LIFE?
I see what works, and do that. I have a good line manager, who has given me room for flexibility. I believe that giving people flexibility is advantageous, because it tends to make them more productive.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUR YOUNGER SELF?
To never let an opportunity pass you by, always believe in yourself, keep your objectives realistic, and don’t undersell yourself.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES?
Nothing is for life and change will happen, and you have to learn how to embrace it. When we feel comfortable, we don’t like to change things. My being made redundant was the start of a new and exciting career which, thirty years on, I still love.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE YOUR STRONG SUITS?
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I like interacting with people, be it teaching and tutoring students, working with colleagues to develop curricula, or pushing the technology with other researchers and professionals from industry. I enjoy the creation of new solutions that help people.

WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT JOB AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS?
I am an Associate Professor in the School of Computing, University of Leeds. I currently work full-time, but have worked part-time briefly in the past on return from maternity leave.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE HOW YOU’VE PROGRESSED WHILE IN LEEDS?
I started my PhD with the School of Computing in 1981, only after encouragement from my Computer Science tutor, as none of my family members had pursued that type of qualification before. I was told at the time that I was the School’s first full-time female PhD student. The Head of School encouraged me to take on a Teaching Assistant post during my PhD writing up stage. This helped me to become a full-time Lecturer in 1987, following a competitive interviewing process. For a while, I was the sole, or one of only two, female lecturers in the School. Now I am happy to see more female academics in our School.

WHAT IMPACT DO YOU FEEL STARTING A FAMILY HAS HAD ON YOUR CAREER?
I have never felt that I had to choose between my career and family. It has, however, sharpened my organisational and decision-making skills. It did have constraints on my ability to travel long distance.

WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES OF RETURNING TO WORK?
My husband worked in an industry that required a rather rigid work pattern, of 8am to 5pm (with commuting, 7am to 6pm). With a young family and no extended family in the UK to call on, for a time I focussed my career around academic leadership in curriculum development and management of taught postgraduate programmes, which did not demand frequent travel. I maintained my research through unfunded projects with a steady, despite slow, stream of publications. When the children had become more independent, I progressed further with more international collaborative research.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM EXPERIENCES?
Because of the circumstances that I encountered when I was doing my PhD and the scarcity of females in the field I was in, I realised the importance of support, encouragement and continuous self-development. Looking back, I gained tremendously by taking Assertiveness Training and the Springboard Programme; and getting involved in AUT Women (now UCU) in my formative years.

I have used my role as a coordinator for student projects, a PhD supervisor, and the Head of Staff Development in my School to encourage and inspire women at all levels, and encourage the provision of equal opportunities for all.
Kevin Meloy

1976: Worked in the mining industry until closure in 2004
1984: Joined the trade union movement, becoming Chairman of the Yorkshire area of the National Union of Mine Workers
2004: Health & Safety Manager for the Faculty of Engineering, University of Leeds
2007: Health & Safety Manager for the Faculty of Engineering, University of Leeds

CAN YOU GIVE US A BRIEF DESCRIPTION ABOUT YOUR CAREER PROGRESSION?

In my current position I am a full time Health and Safety Manager. I started work at 17, keen to make my way in the working world rather than higher education, which I took up later. I took a mechanical engineering apprenticeship in the mining industry – an education that cost in the region of £250k. I then worked in the mining industry for 25 years until they announced closure in 2004.

I was involved in the trade union movement, and eventually rose to become the Chairman of the Yorkshire area of the National Union of Mine Workers. I also stood for parliament as a candidate for the Bassetlaw constituency. When the last coal mine in north Yorkshire closed, I had to make a decision whether to transfer to another regional coal mine, pursue a career in the trade union movement, or a career in health and safety. I saw an opportunity to change career and chose to work for Leeds City Council for two years as a health and safety manager where I became the responsible person for H&S management for LCC agencies.

When an opportunity arose at the University of Leeds in 2007, I recognised a new challenge, addressing vastly different activities to what I was used to. It has been interesting to deal with an environment that contains multiple high risk hazards associated with all types of research and manufacturing processes. During my time here, I have developed strategic plans which have introduced effective, workable procedures in consultation with colleagues and world leading academics.

WHAT PARTS OF YOUR JOB DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST?

Interacting with people. When you find yourself encountering expertise in so many areas, it is rewarding to be able to learn as well as contribute to our activities.

WHAT MADE YOU PURSUE THIS CAREER?

As a young man I was angered by the poor treatment of workers and indifference to the dangers they faced. I wanted to stand up for workers’ rights and so became a trade union representative. One of my most rewarding achievements was to complete the equal value claim for 3500 mining industry women, settling at over £40m compensation.

Health and safety seemed like a natural progression for me, after witnessing several deaths and many serious injuries. I felt strongly that nobody should have to face the trauma experienced by families dealing with the aftermath of bereavement or disability.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES YOU FACE IN YOUR CAREER?

People don’t understand the necessity for safety and how even a simple event, could escalate to a serious injury, and ruin their quality of life or wreck their career. People need to understand that safe working does not inhibit, but enables work. By simple planning, consideration and resourcing, work proceeds efficiently and safely. This is the ethos of the Faculty of Engineering Safety Team.

IN WHAT WAY DOES YOUR WORK AFFECT YOUR PERSONAL LIFE?

When an opportunity arose at the University of Leeds in 2007, I recognised a new challenge, addressing vastly different activities to what I was used to. It has been interesting to deal with an environment that contains multiple high risk hazards associated with all types of research and manufacturing processes. During my time here, I have developed strategic plans which have introduced effective, workable procedures in consultation with colleagues and world leading academics.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE YOUR YOUNGER SELF?

Access higher education at the earliest opportunity. Think about what you’re going to do before you do it and consider others’ views. Appreciate advice from those with greater experience.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES?

I have learnt to accept people for who they are, and understand that taking into consideration others’ opinions as well as my own is important, even if it’s in opposition. I believe that everybody should have a voice. An organisation should listen to all its workers, plan properly and communicate truthfully.

AWARDS

We have won the Vice-Chancellor’s Award for H&S several times, as well as numerous commendations. We hold the RoSPA Gold Award for H&S and RoSPA’s Education & Service Sector Award (finishing second in the UK three years running). We were also the first higher education research and teaching establishment to be accredited to the OH&S 18001 H&S standard, which we have maintained for five years.
I graduated from University of Khartoum in 2004 and then progressed to do an MSc at Swansea University. Later, I received funding to do my PhD in Optical Networking at Leeds. I never had a clear plan, the opportunities just came along and they were too good to miss. I am currently a full-time lecturer in the School of Electronic and Electrical Engineering.

For every situation there is a right balance that can keep everyone happy long term. So no need to sacrifice your career to have a happy family!
Muhammed Basheer

I am Chair in Structural Engineering and also the Head of the School of Civil Engineering.

WHO INFLUENCED YOUR CAREER CHOICE?
My introduction to civil engineering was through my dad. I was fascinated by the things he did.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO PURSUE AN ACADEMIC CAREER?
I love teaching. I worked as a teaching assistant for six months in India before working as a practising engineer for 18 months, but I enjoyed teaching better. I also enjoy research and international activity. I had numerous opportunities to move into administration, but I preferred roles where teaching and research could go with administration.

HOW DO YOU ACHIEVE THE BALANCE BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY LIFE?
I always remind myself about the purpose of life and why I am doing the things I do. The way I consider it is by asking myself; how can the abilities I have be used to support other people? And when it comes to family, I am always there for them, otherwise the purpose is lost.

WHAT QUALITIES HAVE HELPED YOU IN ACHIEVING THE BALANCE BETWEEN YOUR WORK AND FAMILY LIFE?
I live in the present time. When I do something, whether at work or with family, I am fully engaged and dedicated in what I am doing at that moment. It took me some time to develop this skill.

The mistake people usually make is that they don’t allocate time for family, social life and work. Everyone needs time for all of these in order to keep a healthy work life balance.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST IN YOUR CAREER?
Working with world class people in both academic and professional circles and hence getting a sense of achievement.

AWARDS YOU’VE RECEIVED
The most memorable was when I got the Royal Academy of Engineering Fellowship from HRH Prince Phillip in 2014.

THINGS YOU WOULD WANT YOUR YOUNGER SELF TO DO DIFFERENTLY?
The one thing I would change is the time I would spend with my parents, brother and sister. I think I was so focused on my studies and so this reduced the time spent with close family. When people grow up, time is demanded by many things, while at a younger age there is more time.

I go to social events arranged by a charitable organisation that I support. I also spend some time with my family, we go out for dinner, watch a movie or try and visit family friends. Often, I drive to Glasgow to visit my daughter.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES, THE GOOD AND THE BAD?
From the good experiences, I realised that in any society there are numerous good people in all walks of life and I should try and find them and should stay close to them. From the bad experiences, probably one dominates, which is that my ability to ignore or forgive bad attitudes towards me is sometimes seen as a weakness in me by these people.
Virginia Pensabene

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO PURSUE A CAREER IN ACADEMIA? After having my first child, I spent some time as a CEO for WinMedical, a company that I found with my husband and some friends. At that time, I got the chance to experience the work environment in industry, and I had to ask myself what do I like more, industry or academia. I realised that I was more interested in academia as I get the chance to solve problems, to be involved in education and to talk to people from different disciplines. And here I am.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST ABOUT YOUR JOB? I really enjoy working as part of a team. There are things that I just can’t do by myself. I also like to receive continuous feedback from my team, students included! That makes me and my group grow and succeed! Academia also offers me the chance to come up with my own research topics and find out more about something that I am really interested in, and that’s what keeps me motivated.

HOW HAVE YOU FOUND RETURNING TO WORK FROM MATERNITY LEAVE? I had my first child in Italy, and it was alright because I had time to recover, to plan my new life-as-a-mum, and I also had the support from my family. When I had my second child, I was working in the USA and it was quite challenging because I only had eight weeks to recover. I was told that I couldn’t take more time off, otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to reserve my position as a postdoc. These cultural differences, together with the need to grow my career, made me and my husband think about moving to the UK.

Don’t look at what you’ve achieved in a single day as sometimes it makes you frustrated. Instead, wait till the end of the week and see the results!

WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF HR POLICY? I have not utilised any of the family-friendly policies of the University yet, but I am aware of HR policies (flexible working, carers leave, etc.) to support us during specific periods when balancing family and work needs can be challenging.

HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR HOME-LIFE AND WORK-LIFE AFFECT EACH OTHER? Having two children is a huge responsibility because everything needs to be scheduled, especially when they are young. And even when they are busy at school during the day, I always need to be reachable and informed. Sometimes I worried about how my frequent movement from one country to another affects them, but I am happy to hear them speaking different languages, to see them growing without any prejudice or bias, and to expose them to cultural differences.

WHAT SURPRISING FACT WOULDN’T PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT YOU? I like to keep my teenage times alive. I like to listen and sing along to loud rock music in the car.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES, GOOD AND BAD? I have learnt that sometimes it is better to wait, get things correct and then speak. I don’t have to always say something just for the sake of showing my presence. Another precious lesson that I have learnt is that difficult things make us stronger. I remember in University, I was one out of five girls in a class of more than 200 students and one professor said: “You’re girls, engineering is not for you and you should stay at home knitting.” However, that did not stop me or either of us to quit, instead we managed to get respect from everyone.

YOUR FUTURE PLANS? I had my first two projects awarded in my first year in Leeds. Now I am planning to focus on how to develop as a Professor, to complete my five-year probation and to spin off a new company with my PhD students here in Leeds. I also look forward to exploring new cultures and having international collaborations.

2004: Bachelors and MSc in Electrical and Electronic Engineering, University of Pisa, Italy
2008: Exchange researcher at the Department of Life Science Medicine, Waseda University, Japan
2009: PhD in Humanoid Technologies, University of Genova and Medicine, Waseda University, Japan
2011: Postdoctoral Research Associate in Biomedical Engineering, Vanderbilt University, USA
2014: Maternity leave for 2 months
2015: University Academic Fellow, School of Electronic and Electrical Engineering and School of Medicine and Health, University of Leeds

University of Leeds
Nicole Hondow

I started as a University Academic Fellow (UAF) in the area of Materials Characterisation in 2015, which is a role that involves both teaching and research.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED IN YOUR CAREER?
There have been a few challenges, especially being away from family and friends and starting fresh in a new country. Also, the transition from postdoctoral researcher to academic has been interesting. I am still learning how to get a balance between lecturing, supervising, acquiring research grants, and all the other things that unexpectedly come with being an academic!

HOW DO YOU OVERCOME THOSE CHALLENGES?
By deciding the areas that I need to focus on and improve in, learning to prioritise, and continuing to seek advice from mentors.

I enjoy the combination of research and teaching and I love working with researchers who are passionate about their projects.

AWARDS
I was the first person at the University to be awarded an AXA research fellowship in 2012. Through this fellowship I had two years of independent research where I could continue to use the amazing equipment we have here at Leeds, to build collaborations, and to develop my career.

I find both science and engineering really interesting and enjoy having the opportunity to work with lots of different people.

HOW DO YOU ACHIEVE BALANCE BETWEEN YOUR WORK AND PERSONAL LIFE?
I went on a fantastic course through the University that helped me achieve work-life balance.

One of the main things I’ve learnt is that it’s OK to say ‘no’ to some of the things you are asked to do; therefore you can prioritise the things that are important to you, in both work and at home.

2003: BSc (Honours) in Chemistry, University of Western Australia
2007: PhD in Chemistry, University of Western Australia
2008: Postdoctoral Researcher in Electron Microscopy, University of Leeds
2012: AXA Independent Research Fellowship
2015: University Academic Fellow in Materials Characterisation

WHAT CAN YOU DESCRIBE HOW YOU’VE PROGRESSED WHILE IN LEEDS?
I joined the University as a postdoctoral research assistant after completing my PhD in Chemistry in Australia. I really enjoyed the work I was doing and the people I worked with, so I continued on a second project. Following this I was encouraged and supported in applying for independent fellowships.

2008: Postdoctoral Researcher, Leeds
2012: AXA Independent Research Fellowship
2015: University Academic Fellow in Materials Characterisation
Can you describe how you’ve progressed while at Leeds?
After leaving school I worked in a plastics company for five years. When I realised there was no chance for improvement, I applied to an advert for an Apprentice Technician in the School of Mechanical Engineering in 2009. My application was successful and I’ve been at the University ever since.

After completing three placements as a trainee, a technician position arose in the School of Electronic and Electrical Engineering, where I worked for two years. I then moved back to the School of Mechanical Engineering to work with the Institute of Functional Surfaces, on a project called Lifelong Joints.

What made you choose this career?
The chance to develop. I left a well-paid job and came here to re-train as an Apprentice Technician. It was a better choice, considering my long-term development and career ambitions.

What parts of your job do you enjoy the most?
The diversity in the job and the people I interact with. I do different work all the time with post docs who are working on varied research projects. Moreover, I am able to interact with people from different backgrounds all the time. I also get the chance to work with the people who have trained me on a daily basis, which is great, because it shows me how much I’ve progressed.

What are the main challenges in your career?
Learning all the health and safety requirements, creating risk assessments and making sure everything is safe for different categories of staff and students, including researchers, undergraduates and PhD students.

What impact do you feel starting a family has had on your career?
The University is where I met my wife. She was a technician in Civil Engineering, so we have a similar work environment. We try to keep our work and home lives separate. We only discuss work on our commute, and when we get out of the car we completely forget about it.

The University is very open about telling their staff what they’re entitled to, which is really good. For instance, the paternity leave policy is generous and my wife and I are planning to benefit from it soon, as we’re expecting our first child.

I’ve been a Lead Technician in the School of Mechanical Engineering since 2016. I now manage a team of three technicians and together we manage seven labs.

What has helped you achieve this balance?
I have always believed that work is only a part of my life, so I try to keep work and home life separate. I have a large family and spend most weekends with them. I have also gained a lot of friends at work and we spend time together outside of work – we don’t discuss work then!

What do you do when you’re not working?
Sports. I go with my wife or brother to watch cricket or rugby league. I used to play football, but everyone I used to play with has now got married and had children, so things are more family orientated now.

What advice would you give your younger self?
Always be grateful to the people who have helped you and be keen to improve yourself.

What career did you want to go into when you were at school?
I was always interested in science, so I thought I would do something related to that.

When did you decide you wanted to go into this career?
I decided in my last year at school.

How important was family to your decision to go into this career?
Very important. Family is really important to me and I know my parents supported me.

Now you are in this career, what advice would you give to someone who is thinking about going into this same career?
Make sure you listen to everyone’s advice and then make your own decision. Don’t be afraid to retrain or do anything challenging. Try to take opportunities that arise. Money isn’t everything, so you should look at the bigger picture and the long-term advantages of different opportunities.

I’ve been a Lead Technician in the School of Mechanical Engineering since 2016. I now manage a team of three technicians and together we manage seven labs.
**Briony Thomas**

**CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR CURRENT JOB AT THE UNIVERSITY?**
My current position is as a full-time Lecturer in Design Theory. For the past four years I’ve been on secondment in Engineering working with the Product Design team and researchers within iDRO. This academic year I’m working 50:50 between the School of Mechanical Engineering and the School of Design.

**CAN YOU DESCRIBE HOW YOU’VE PROGRESSED WHILE AT LEEDS?**
I joined the University in 2004. I had just started a part-time PhD when I was offered a 0.4FTE teaching position. Following several fixed-term contracts, I was appointed as a full-time lecturer when I had completed my studies.

I’ve been fortunate during my career to establish a network of colleagues both within and beyond the University. I was offered a sabbatical position at York Centre for Cross-disciplinary Systems Analysis (University of York) in 2013 and I spent a fantastic 12 months working with scientists and engineers from different disciplines.

In January 2015 I began a four-year secondment in Mechanical Engineering working with the design science group in iDRO. Over the past few years I have collaborated with colleagues in robotics; taught students on the MDes Product Design programme; delivered a Newton Fund project with Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico); and undertaken an invited study visit at MIT. It’s been an exciting time!

**WHAT MADE YOU PURSUE THIS CAREER?**
I never knew what I wanted to do as a career. I was creative at school, so my teachers encouraged me to go to art college after A levels. My interest in structural and scientific aspects of design developed during my art foundation year and I decided to study at Leeds because the course offered a balance of creative practice and science/technology. This interest continued and I focused on geometry in design during my Masters, which led to my PhD research. When I was offered the chance to teach while studying my PhD, I jumped at the chance. I never intended to become an academic, but here I am!

**WHAT PARTS OF YOUR JOB DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST?**
I enjoy working in a subject where I can engage in both theory and practice. I’ll sketch and make models to visualise the ideas I’m working on. I also find working with students very rewarding and one of the most satisfying parts of the job.

**WHAT IMPACT DO YOU FEEL YOUR CAREER HAS HAD ON YOUR FAMILY?**
I had my first child before my career had really started. I decided to use my maternity leave and part-time working hours to allow me to study and I began my Masters when my daughter was two weeks old. As a single parent I was working two-days a week and studying full-time. It was a very challenging time but I was determined to provide the best possible future for my daughter and I was fortunate to have my family supporting me. I met my husband at University and we had a further two children. Having children at a relatively young age made me re-prioritise. It also made me realise that I’m defined by more than my career success.

**WHAT DO YOU FEEL IS THE DEMANDS OF WORK AND FAMILY LIFE?**
It’s not been easy working full-time and also being a mother to three children. It’s a constant juggled act. My husband is also an academic so we support each other and share the responsibilities of family life. We managed pre-school childcare with the support of extended family and used the University’s Bright Beginnings nursery. We now make the most of flexible working arrangements and working from home when possible. My recent study visit to MIT was supported by the engineering conference and training support scheme, which was invaluable in helping to cover some of the extra costs incurred for childcare.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE YOUR YOUNGER SELF?**
To surround yourself with people who share your values and inspire you to become the best version of yourself.

**WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES?**
To look for the positive in every situation – challenges are opportunities. There are often times when I’m asked to deliver things outside my comfort zone. I’ve learnt to enjoy the challenge. I’ve also learnt to observe and reflect on what I’ve seen in meetings, presentations, teaching and in different management styles. It’s helped me to develop my professional skills and to understand the leadership styles that I respect.
CAREER?

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS CAREER?

I joined the University of Leeds as a lecturer in 2015. Since then, I have progressed in many ways. I’ve had the opportunity to develop and lead the new MSc in Transport Infrastructure: Design and Construction and I am Deputy Director of the Neville Centre of Excellence in Cement and Concrete Engineering.

One of the most (unexpectedly) exciting things that have happened to me is being Civil Engineering’s Champion of Equality and Inclusion. This has involved working with staff and students from across the Faculty, serving as a panellist to assess Athena Swan applications from across the country and being invited to give a talk at the first LGBT in STEM event in our University. I was also involved in organising the first ever #BuildingEquality event to promote LGBT+ visibility in the construction industry… It has all been extremely rewarding.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS CAREER?

I’ve always liked to study, to look for information and read from books or papers, especially in relation to science and engineering subjects. In addition to civil and structural engineering, I also did an MSc in statistics and studied foreign languages… Not that I needed any of that to get better chances from a professional point of view, but simply because I liked to pursue different interests and learn new things. Also, I’ve always been very fond of teaching, and I think it’s an enormous privilege. When I was an undergraduate back in Spain, at one point I had to start working part-time, so I took the qualifying exam to start teaching English as a foreign language, and I loved it. So basically, a career in academia was the perfect way for me to make a living doing what I loved – can one be luckier than that? I doubt it!

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST IN YOUR CAREER?

Interacting and working with my students, at all levels: teaching undergraduate courses, supervising those doing their research projects or dissertations and postgraduate students… I say ‘working with them’ because it really goes both ways and I try to form a team with them, even in the lecture theatre. Those days when you’re driving back home with the feeling that you’ve made a difference to some of your students’ lives, that you have helped them discover or learn something new… There’s nothing better.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR CHALLENGES YOU’VE FACED IN YOUR CAREER?

It took me some time to stop thinking as a postdoc and start thinking as an academic. It probably sounds like an easy thing to do but it is a big change and, at least in my case, it took longer than I imagined. Learning to cope with the frustration that comes after having grant proposals or papers rejected is a big deal. Or learning to clearly see the difference between what’s important and what’s urgent but not necessarily important. Or being able to multi-task and try to stay focused when you’re writing a paper and e-mails keep coming. Another challenge is to be taken seriously despite your age: being (relatively) young sometimes feels like a disadvantage, and I guess that’s not very different from what our graduates experience when they take up a new job. The solution is always to focus on what you do, to enjoy it, and not to be disheartened.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUR YOUNGER SELF?

Don’t take anything too personally. It’s difficult because, when you love your job, it becomes personal. But the ability to switch off and the capacity to keep on working even when things get difficult is a valuable skill. And again, it sounds obvious but it can be extremely difficult at times. Patience and perseverance are equally important.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES?

In my experience, there are two main challenges: our inclination for over-thinking, and the fact that we’re always connected and surrounded by a lot of information. The fact that we carry our work with us in our mobile or tablet, in our laptop, always and even out of hours, can become a huge distraction. You need to give yourself e-mail-free time to think, work and write.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES?

I think one of the most surprising things people usually don’t know about me is that I am passionate about literature, to the extent that I did a BA in English language and literature. My living room is full of books, and not only novels – I’ve got an entire bookcase packed with poetry books! But there’s not a single one about engineering (I keep those in my office!). I can spend hours in a second-hand bookshop…

WHAT WOULD YOU BE SURPRISED TO KNOW ABOUT YOU?

I think that’s not very different from what our graduates experience when they take up a new job. The solution is always to focus on what you do, to enjoy it, and not to be disheartened.
The University of Leeds has a wide range of inclusive policies to support all staff including: flexible working, carers leave, generous maternity leave/adoptions leave and shared parental leave.

The Faculty of Engineering has a dedicated Athena SWAN and Equality and Inclusion committee and the Faculty currently holds an Athena SWAN Silver award. The committee and related working groups are continuously working on expanding and broadening the Faculty Athena SWAN/E&I action plan to ensure all our staff feel fully supported and are aware of the faculty and University’s inclusive guidance and policy. The committee are constantly gathering feedback and data from staff in order to create actions relevant to what staff are requesting.

To help with raising awareness across the Faculty on the policies and support that is available for our staff, and how to easily access these, the Faculty HR team have an easily accessible Faculty HR Sharepoint site for current staff. This is the first point of contact for information both specific to the Faculty of Engineering and University policy, and is a key place where staff can find important and regularly used policies, guidance and available support including the family friendly and flexible working policies.


We have a dedicated and approachable Faculty HR team and HR contacts in each School and Faculty, to ensure that our staff members’ queries can be answered efficiently and effectively. We ensure that we provide thorough consistent information for all our staff, including inductions for our new starters and ongoing support for our current staff. Please do not hesitate to search our internal Faculty HR SharePoint or contact the Faculty HR team:

engineeringhr@leeds.ac.uk

For the latest information please refer to the University’s HR website http://hr.leeds.ac.uk

Some of our key Athena SWAN and E&I achievements include:

- We have created a “You Said, We Did” page on our SharePoint site to demonstrate to staff that we are aware of issues they have raised, for example via staff surveys, and to keep them informed of what actions we are taking.
- We have created a Wellbeing room, which can be used, for example, to express milk, take medication and rest for health related reasons. We are sharing a Wellbeing room with Maths and Physical Sciences in EC Stoner for our staff based in Computing.
- We have played a leading role in shaping the University’s guidance regarding support for those returning from extended periods of leave related to caring, e.g. maternity and shared parental leave.
- We played a leading role in organising the University’s first LGBT STEM day in July 2018 and are part of the Building Equality working group. This is an external LGBT+ Construction Working Group, which aims to challenge and change the construction industry to be more LGBT+ inclusive.
- We have created a Faculty Wellness Programme in conjunction with the Edge for those experiencing anxiety and depression, which has begun to be rolled out to other Faculties.
- We ensure that all those involved in recruitment have undergone E&I training, and undertaken in person unconscious bias training, if possible. Our new starter survey shows that 99% of respondents said that the interview process ran smoothly and was carried out professionally, which would suggest that our recruiters take a fair, professional approach.
- We interviewed women who had been offered academic posts with us, to help us to determine how to attract more female academic staff. They said that having the opportunity to gain a sense of whether the School would be a good cultural fit for them was a major factor in their decision-making about accepting a position. As a result we now provide academic interviewees with more opportunities to meet students and less senior academic staff when they visit for interview. We follow this up with feedback via our ‘new starter’ and ‘recruitment’ surveys.

Celebrating International Women’s Day 2018