

**Back in 2015, an article in the *CESR Review* (Mentoring Professional Women in Aviation and Aerospace) reported on an ESRC co-funded project to design a mentoring scheme for women in the aviation and aerospace industry. The project was based on a knowledge-exchange partnership between ourselves (the UWE team), the Royal Aeronautical Society (RaeS), the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Airbus. These partner organisations recognised the critical role that women play in their industry and through a formal mentoring programme, wanted to support their female professionals and encourage more into leadership roles.**

In this *CESR Review* special issue to celebrate International Women's Day, we are delighted to report that the mentoring scheme (called alta) was launched in October, 2015, at the Women in Aviation and Aerospace conference at the prestigious Royal Aeronautical Society headquarters in Mayfair, London. The launch stimulated a great deal of interest from the female audience and to date, we have just over eighty women from the founding partner organisations signed up to the scheme. The aim of this article is to update *CESR Review* readers on the project, to report what we learned from the research (i.e. what women told us they wanted from alta), how alta is progressing within its first three months and our plans for the future.



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### *The project objectives*

From the outset we were working with a set of key objectives:

- to provide an industry-wide mentoring scheme to support professional women on a 'woman to woman' basis;
- based on academic research through semi-structured interviews, focus groups and an industry survey (with a total of circa 250 female professionals (mainly engineers) and employers);
- provide both career and social support to women;
- become a focal point for women in the industry, via blogs, FAQs and a resource centre;
- design and deliver face-to-face and on-line mentor training; and
- hold regular networking events for alta members and build a mentoring community.





alta is fully endorsed and supported by the project partners and by many women professionals and employers throughout the industry. It addresses the practical challenges for women and provides what they told us they wanted from a formal, industry-wide mentoring scheme.

Despite their proven abilities, negative views remain about women in male dominated industries and organisations, which is evidenced through our own research. Women's representation in engineering in the UK is lower than for other European countries (Kiwana *et al.*, 2011). We were in contact with approximately 250 women across the industry who identified a number of challenges for women working in a male dominated environment. These challenges included the perception by others that engineering is a 'masculine' profession and therefore not suitable for women; engineering not being sufficiently promoted by schools and careers advisers; and the lack of fit between being a mother and pursuing a career as an engineer.

The majority of our research participants had very little previous or current experience of being mentored. Informal mentoring was much more common but this tended to be *ad hoc*, more available to senior women and not sufficient for structured career mentoring. Overall, mentoring was identified as important but not necessarily available to most of our respondents. While respondents were very aware of the benefits of mentoring, most were not being mentored. Mentoring was seen as especially valuable to women because it could help with issues that specifically impact women, such as maternity leave and return to work, work-life balance and childcare issues, opportunities to network with other women in the industry and gaining support. Many had not had the opportunity to mentor others and indicated they wanted to become mentors through the alta scheme. Others were interested in finding a mentor within the wider industry and most expressed a preference for those mentors to be female.

Through our research, we know that female professionals and employers in the industry could see the benefits to be gained from alta. They felt that there was a lack of female mentors within the industry and that alta could help to address this. Many especially welcomed the 'woman to woman' aspect of alta. Following on from this, respondents also felt there was a definite need for alta as it would offer mentors for women at all levels of the industry, to gain an outside perspective on the industry as well as development opportunities and help to connect with and share experiences with other women. Importantly, employers were also positive about what alta could offer, including enabling women to seek guidance and learn from other women, gaining a mentor outside the immediate working environment, helping to address women's issues and boosting their confidence, facilitating access to female role models, empowering women through mutual support and helping to grow the female talent pool. They also felt that alta would send a strong message to schools that the industry is doing something about its shortage of females.

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Many participants commented on the importance of alta, for example:

*"I think women should have the opportunity to have mentoring and not all women do have it because it depends on your manager and things like that. So I think if it is outside of your company and it is something that you yourself can request then I think that is a good thing. So yes I think it is a good idea...hopefully it will give women some opportunity that maybe they didn't have or didn't have the courage to ask for." [Female professional]*

*"I think women are more likely to open up to other women and be honest with them rather than trying to be as good as the men. I think it is easier to say how you really feel to another woman. So I think there is a definite need." [Female professional]*

### *Why is alta for women only?*

We believe that a mixed scheme for men and women, devoid of a 'gendered lens', would mean that the particular needs of women would (once again) be overlooked and that women may be disregarded as potential mentors. A scheme that is not sensitive to gender differences would advantage men, who, according to national and international research, find it easier to identify suitable mentors and are indeed more likely than women to have mentors (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014; Ragins and Cotton, 1991).

A gender mixed scheme would also do nothing to address the under-representation of women at top levels of leadership and decision-making roles. If we continue to do what we have always done, we will continue to get what we have always got – gender inequality in

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decision making roles. Research from the UK's Women's Resource Centre (WRC) (2007) identifies some of the benefits of women only services, including, women feeling more comfortable in expressing themselves and articulating their particular needs in a woman-only environment and taking stock of their own circumstances before going out into mixed gender spaces. alta is designed to recognise that female professionals have different kinds of experiences to men and

that they may face specific challenges. The support of other women, which is often difficult to access, given the gender composition of the industry, can be hugely beneficial in helping female professionals face those challenges.

Research also tells us that women feel less constrained or intimidated in a woman-to-woman environment. This in itself allows women to develop a sense of voice, which is crucial if the underrepresentation of women in the industry, especially at leadership levels, is to be addressed. Research from WRC revealed how women-only spaces ensured that women were more able to be themselves, feel more relaxed and more able to open up. These are important features to enable the development of successful mentoring relationships.

alta's women centred approach is based on the concept of empowerment, its aim being to raise levels of confidence and self-esteem. By enabling female professionals to share experiences, alta seeks to break down isolation and enable women to actively develop networks, something that research indicates they often struggle with when compared to men. By creating a community of female mentors and mentees, alta provides female professionals with unique opportunities to connect with other women in a community, based on common experiences.

### *How alta works in practice*

During its first year, alta is open to mentees from the founding partner organisations only and to mentors across the aviation and aerospace industry. One of our key objectives from the beginning was to offer mentoring to professional women at all levels and this has enabled us to avoid the problems we have encountered with other mentoring schemes operating in the industry that are open only to graduates or women identified as 'talent'. alta mentors are experienced women from within the industry with the breadth of experience to offer careers advice and provide a guiding hand. Notwithstanding their experience, all alta mentors are required to go through the bespoke on-line training that we designed as part of the project. This helps us to ensure that our mentors are fully aligned with the alta objectives and are well prepared to start mentoring, irrespective of whether they have previous mentoring experience. Once we have been through the initial piloting phase, alta will be opened up to other women in organisations across the industry.

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defined needs. This helps us to get around some of the problems associated with the more subjective matching process where one or two people make decisions about the match (known as hand matching). alta is mentee-led in that, while the mentor provides support, guidance and encouragement, the mentee is responsible for identifying their mentoring needs to the mentor, initiating meetings and following up on agreed actions.

alta also brings together a diverse range of women from across the industry within its shared community, this running in parallel with the setting-up and maintenance of one-to-one mentoring relationships.

A key feature of alta is that it offers participants choice in terms of how and when the mentoring meetings take place, which can be face-to-face, by email, telephone or via social media, such as skype or webex. This flexibility is important because many of our members will be employed in parts of the industry which requires them to be away from home and their regular place of work. For example, those in the Royal Air Force who are likely to be away on deployment for a number of months, or women may be away from the workplace on maternity leave and want to keep in touch with their mentor and/or need help when returning to work from maternity leave.

We also recognise that a number of women may choose a mentor who is geographically located in a different part of the UK, Europe or beyond and we wanted to ensure that physical proximity was not a barrier to a mentee finding the right mentor.

alta is also a resource centre for women in the industry with members being able to communicate via our blog, submit questions, access general information about the industry and academic and industry reports on women in the workplace, view profiles of successful women and be able to get in touch with them.

### *The future*

The first alta networking events are planned for March (Bristol) and June (London) 2016. After its first six months of operation, the UWE team will survey alta members to measure progress and impact and will repeat this at regular intervals in the future. Alongside this, alta will open its membership to women within the wider industry in Autumn 2016, with the aim to build and maintain a critical mass of women. The UWE team and project partners will continue to work together to ensure that alta is the success it deserves to be and that women are getting the help and support they need. We believe that alta will help women to share experiences, to inspire and be inspired, to help to develop a new generation of leaders for their industry and to demonstrate that they are an integral part of its future success. alta is underpinned by the recognition that women are under-represented within the aviation and aerospace industry, especially at the highest levels and we want to ensure that women reach their full career potential, for their own benefits and for the industry as a whole.

The UWE team and project partners will continue to work together to ensure that alta is the success it deserves to be and that women are getting the help and support they need.

International Women's Day is about celebrating women's social, economic, cultural and political achievements and moving nearer to the achievement of gender equality. We believe that alta is an important step on the journey to achieving this. While there are still huge steps to be taken in this male dominated industry, alta will enable us to build a critical mass of women who can encourage and support one another towards their collective career success. We are proud to be a part of alta and look forward to continuing our work to make alta the success it deserves to be.

### *About the authors*

Sue Durbin, who led the UWE team, is Professor in Human Resource Management at the University of the West of England. Her area of expertise is gendered employment, specifically women professionals and managers who are employed in male-dominated industries and organisations, including senior management, engineering and science. Dr Ana Lopes is a senior lecturer in human resource management and, since her move to Newcastle University, is an associate member of the Centre for Employment Studies. Dr John Neugebauer has worked as a university lecturer in the UK and in Europe and is a qualified coach, with experience of coaching and mentoring across all sectors, both in the



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