

The Inspire Initiative: Addressing Gender Imbalances in Economics

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Abstract

The Inspire Initiative, one of the four initiatives of the Royal Economic Society's (RES) UK Women in Economics Network (UK WEN), aims to address gender imbalances in economics by providing career insights and role models for young women. Through events featuring accomplished women economists, the initiative inspires students and early-career professionals to pursue and advance in economics. This paper evaluates the initiative's impact, focusing on events held during 2024–2025. Using quantitative survey data and qualitative feedback, it highlights how the initiative has positively influenced participants' career motivation, confidence, and understanding of diverse career paths within academia, government, and the private sector. Results show significant empowerment and increased clarity in career goals. This is a UK national initiative aimed at promoting greater inclusivity and diversity in the economics profession.

Keywords: *Women in economics; gender diversity; career development; empowerment and inspiration; economics education; role models.*

1. Introduction

Gender imbalances in economics remain a longstanding issue, with women significantly underrepresented in both the academic and professional world. While progress has been made in many disciplines, economics continues to lag behind in terms of gender diversity, with women representing a smaller proportion of economics undergraduates, and their numbers decreasing further as they advance to postgraduate levels and into the workforce (Ginther & Kahn, 2004; Paredes Fuentes et al., 2023). This phenomenon is often described as the “leaky pipeline,” where women exit the profession at various stages due to systemic barriers such as implicit biases, limited exposure to female role models, and a general lack of inclusivity within the field (Buckles, 2019; Lundberg & Stearns, 2019).

Research suggests that these disparities are not just limited to academic settings but are also reflected in the lack of women in leadership roles within economics (Bayer & Rouse, 2016).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of diversity in economics, particularly in terms of representation in senior roles, women remain underrepresented in these areas (Auriol et al., 2022). The absence of adequate mentorship and professional guidance for women in the field further compounds this gender gap in leadership positions.

The Inspire Initiative, launched by the Royal Economic Society's (RES) UK Women in Economics Network (UK WEN) in 2023, seeks to address these challenges by providing a platform for young women and early-career professionals to engage with accomplished women in economics. The initiative is part of UK WEN's broader strategy to improve gender equality in economics and create a more diverse and inclusive profession. As one of the four initiatives of UK WEN, the Inspire Initiative aims to provide career insights, access to role models, and a showcase of the diverse career paths within the economics profession for women at various stages of their careers.

Since leading the Inspire Initiative in July 2023, I have organised 11 events, including 4 in the 2023–2024 academic year and 7 in the 2024–2025 academic year. These events have attracted over 500 participants, engaging with accomplished women economists from diverse fields within academia, government, and the private sector. Through these events, participants gain valuable insights into the varied career pathways within economics, learn from personal experiences shared by female role models, and receive practical advice on overcoming challenges and achieving success in their careers.

The primary aim of the Inspire Initiative is to reduce the gender imbalance in economics by providing female students with tangible role models who can inspire and motivate them to pursue careers in the field. Through its two main strands—Inspirational Talks for Future Economists, aimed at students, and Inspirational Talks for Future Leaders, directed at early-career professionals—the initiative seeks to empower women, boost their confidence, and help them navigate the often male-dominated spaces of economics. By offering a platform for women in leadership roles to share their stories, the Inspire Initiative also seeks to develop a cultural shift within the profession, encouraging more women to take on leadership positions and therefore promoting gender equality.

Despite the growing recognition of the need for such initiatives, research into their effectiveness is still developing. Bateman et al. (2021) highlight the importance of addressing gender imbalances in economics, with a particular focus on structural barriers, mentorship, and career progression for women in the field. This paper aims to assess the impact of the Inspire Initiative based on the events held during the 2024–2025 academic year. By drawing on quantitative survey data and qualitative feedback from participants, this paper explores how the initiative has influenced career motivation, confidence, and understanding of the diverse career paths available within economics.

2. The Inspire Initiative

2.1. Overview and Structure

The Inspire Initiative, launched by the Royal Economic Society's (RES) UK Women in Economics Network (UK WEN) in 2023, aims to address gender imbalances in the field of economics. This initiative seeks to provide aspiring and early-career women economists with the resources, mentorship, and role models necessary to thrive in the profession. It targets two distinct groups: young women currently studying economics and early-career professionals looking to advance in their careers. The initiative operates through two primary strands:

Inspirational Talks for Future Economists: This strand focuses on university students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, offering them an opportunity to engage with accomplished women economists. The aim is to raise awareness of the diverse career opportunities in economics, inspire confidence, and encourage women to pursue and persist in economics-related careers.

Inspirational Talks for Future Leaders: This strand is aimed at early-career women economists who are navigating their way through academia, the public sector, and the private sector. These events focus on leadership development, overcoming gender-specific barriers, and providing professional guidance for women looking to progress into senior roles.

Through these talks, the initiative strives to promote a more inclusive and diverse profession by elevating the visibility of female role models and providing actionable career insights.

2.2. Objectives of the Inspire Initiative

The core objectives of the Inspire Initiative are:

Empowerment and Retention: To empower young women and early-career professionals by providing them with the inspiration, confidence, and career guidance they need to pursue and sustain careers in economics.

Role Model Visibility: To increase the visibility of successful women in economics, by offering participants tangible examples of individuals who have navigated the challenges of the profession and succeeded.

Promotion of Career Diversity: To expose participants to a broad range of career paths within the economics profession, from academia to government and the private sector, helping them make informed decisions about their career trajectories.

Leadership Development: To support women in developing the skills necessary to take on leadership roles in economics, tackling barriers to progression, and fostering a pipeline of future women leaders.

2.3. Description of the Events

Since taking leadership of the Inspire Initiative in July 2023, I have organized and led 11 events, including four in the 2023–2024 academic year and seven in the 2024–2025 academic year. These events have attracted over 500 participants and have featured prominent women economists from academia, government, and the private sector. The events are designed to be interactive and participatory, incorporating a range of activities to engage attendees and providing them with practical insights. Key event components include:

Panel Discussions: Experts from various fields within economics are invited to share their career journeys, discussing the challenges they have faced and the strategies they used to overcome them.

Q&A Sessions: Participants are encouraged to engage directly with the speakers during structured Q&A sessions, providing an opportunity for participants to ask questions and receive personalised advice.

Career Advice from Speakers: During the events, speakers share valuable information about career opportunities within their organisations, including internships, early-career roles, and strategies for career advancement. This enables participants to better understand the diverse career pathways available in the field of economics and learn how to navigate them successfully.

Networking and Mentorship: The initiative creates networking opportunities, enabling participants to connect with speakers and peers. These interactions may lead to mentoring relationships that support continuous professional development.

The events are delivered in collaboration with leading universities, economic societies, industry bodies, and professional networks, ensuring broad participation and ensuring the initiative's messages reach a wide and diverse audience.

3. Methodology and Results

3.1. Methodology

This paper employs a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the impact of the Inspire Initiative, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collected from participants at the events conducted as part of the initiative during the 2024–2025 academic year. The analysis primarily focuses on understanding how the initiative influences university students' career motivation, confidence, and awareness of career paths within economics. Additionally, it explores how the initiative encourages students to remain in the profession and pursue a career in economics, highlighting the impact of female role models and career insights shared during the events.

3.1.1. Data Collection

Feedback was gathered from participants at the end of each event via anonymous surveys. The surveys were designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. **Quantitative Data:** Participants rated various aspects of the event (e.g., overall satisfaction, usefulness of career advice, and engagement with role models) on a Likert scale, using options such as ‘excellent’, ‘good’, ‘fair’, and ‘poor’. These closed-ended questions provided a structured way to measure the impact of the event in terms of key outcomes. However, quantitative data analysis was focused on the two most recent events: the University of Manchester (March 2025) and Birmingham City University (February 2025). These events were selected because they had a higher response rate compared to others, resulting in a more robust sample size for analysis. The quantitative data from these events helped to assess the initiative’s effectiveness in terms of career motivation, confidence-building, and the understanding of diverse career paths within economics. **Qualitative Data:** To capture more in-depth insights, open-ended questions were used across all five university events conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year. These questions allowed participants to provide deeper insights into various aspects, such as the most inspiring parts of the event, how it influenced their career decisions, and their understanding of career options in economics. The qualitative data was thematically analysed to identify recurring patterns, with a focus on key themes such as the impact of female role models, career barriers in economics, and the perceived value of networking opportunities.

3.1.2. Data Analysis

For the quantitative data, responses from the University of Manchester and Birmingham City University events were aggregated and analysed to measure the overall impact of the event on participants. Summary statistics (e.g., the percentage of participants rating aspects of the event as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’) were calculated and presented in tables to highlight the key areas of impact. For the qualitative data, open-ended responses were coded into themes aligned with the core objectives of the Inspire Initiative. These themes included increased career motivation, greater confidence, career diversity awareness, and enhanced understanding of leadership roles in economics. Thematic analysis was performed to identify common insights across the five university events.

3.1.3. Limitations

While the survey data provides valuable insights, the study is subject to a few limitations. Not all events collected participant feedback, resulting in incomplete data for some events. Additionally, some events had smaller sample sizes, which may limit how widely the findings can be applied. However, focusing on the most recent events with higher response rates ensures that the quantitative analysis is based on a more reliable and representative sample. Another

limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases, such as participant memory recall.

3.2. Results and Findings

The analysis of the Inspire Initiative’s impact draws on both quantitative and qualitative data collected from participants in five university events held during the 2024–2025 academic year. The quantitative data is derived from responses to structured survey questions, while the qualitative data captures participants' open-ended feedback.

3.2.1. Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis focuses on the two most recent events, those held at the University of Manchester (March 2025) and Birmingham City University (February 2025), with a total sample of 46 responses. Table 1 presents the combined results from these two events, reflecting participants' responses to key aspects of the event, with the results shown in percentages.

Table 1. Results

Rating	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
Excellent	82.61	60.87	63.05	69.57	100
Good	15.22	39.13	34.78	26.09	
Fair	2.17		2.17	4.34	
Poor					

Explanation of the results in Table 1:

- 1: Overall event rating:** The overall satisfaction with the event was overwhelmingly positive, with 82.61% of participants rating it as “Excellent,” and 15.22% rating it as “Good.” Only 2.17% rated the event as “Fair,” with no responses marked as “Poor.”
- 2: Diverse career path examples:** The initiative provided valuable insights into career opportunities, with 60.87% of participants rating this aspect as “Excellent” and 39.13% as “Good.” This indicates the event’s success in showcasing diverse career paths in economics.
- 3: Role model access:** Participants appreciated the access to senior female role models in economics, with 63.05% rating this aspect as “Excellent” and 34.78% as “Good.” This suggests the event was successful in elevating the visibility of successful women in the field.
- 4: Inspiring economics students to remain in the profession:** The event effectively inspired students to pursue and persist in economics-related careers, with 69.57% rating this objective as

“Excellent” and 26.09% as “Good.” This result demonstrates the initiative's success in motivating participants to stay in the profession.

5: Recommend to others: 100% of participants stated they would recommend the event to other students, highlighting the high level of satisfaction and perceived value of the event.

3.2.2. Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis focuses on feedback collected from open-ended questions across all five university events. This data provides a deeper insight into participants' experiences and highlights recurring themes related to the impact of the initiative. Thematic analysis of the responses revealed the following key themes:

Career Motivation and Confidence: Participants reported a significant increase in career motivation and confidence after engaging with the events. Many students expressed that hearing from female role models inspired them to continue pursuing careers in economics. As one participant noted, “Hearing from someone who has faced similar challenges was incredibly inspiring.” Another participant mentioned, “These talks have shown me that there is space for women at all levels in economics.”

Role Models and Career Insights: The visibility of successful women in economics was cited as one of the most impactful aspects of the event. Participants appreciated learning about the varied career paths of women economists, including those in academia, government, and the private sector. “The different paths the panellists took to get to where they are today were very inspiring,” said one participant.

Networking Opportunities: Many participants highlighted the importance of networking and the potential for mentorship. Attendees valued the opportunity to connect with established economists, with several reporting that they formed meaningful professional connections during the event. “The networking opportunity was invaluable, and I now have a few mentors I can turn to for advice,” one respondent stated.

Diverse Career Paths in Economics: Participants noted that the events expanded their understanding of the diverse career paths available within economics. “It made me realise that there are many different fields within economics I can explore, beyond what I initially thought,” said one attendee. This feedback indicates that the initiative is broadening students' career horizons and helping them see economics as a multifaceted field.

Challenges and Overcoming Barriers: Many participants acknowledged the challenges faced by women in the economics profession and appreciated hearing how the panellists overcame these barriers. The theme of “imposter syndrome” was mentioned frequently, with several participants remarking that hearing about how successful women had navigated these challenges gave them confidence to continue pursuing their goals. As one respondent shared, “It was

reassuring to hear that even the most successful women in economics have faced the same challenges.”

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that the Inspire Initiative has had a positive impact on participants' career motivation, confidence, and understanding of diverse career paths in economics. The initiative has successfully engaged participants across multiple universities, providing them with access to female role models, career insights, and valuable networking opportunities. The themes emerging from qualitative data highlight the importance of visibility, mentorship, and career advice in supporting women's careers in economics.

4. Conclusion

The Inspire Initiative has demonstrated significant potential in addressing gender imbalances in economics, particularly in terms of career motivation, confidence, and access to role models. The initiative has successfully engaged a broad range of participants, empowering them to pursue careers in economics and take on leadership roles. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data highlights the positive influence of female role models, career insights, and mentorship opportunities provided during the events. Feedback from participants indicates a clear demand for such initiatives, with many reporting increased motivation to pursue and sustain careers in economics, as well as greater clarity about the diverse career paths available in the field. The networking opportunities, personal stories, and advice shared by established women economists have proven invaluable in shaping participants' career aspirations. While the data collected thus far is promising, further research is needed to assess the initiative's long-term effects and its potential for broader implementation across the profession. Expanding the initiative's reach to more universities and sectors could further enhance its potential to address gender disparities in economics. In conclusion, the Inspire Initiative has made meaningful strides in empowering women in economics, fostering an inclusive and diverse environment.

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