



Lise Meitner seminar on role models



Current and former Lise Meitner professors at LTH. From left to right: Carolyn Beck, Codina Cotar, Milena Corredig and Margret Bauer. Photo: Kennet Ruona

Dedicated to the power of role models in academia, LTH's Lise Meitner seminar 15 October was jam-packed. With a main lecture by Automatic Control, followed by a panel discussion, the event was concluded by the Dean of LTH presenting the new Lise Meitner professors with diplomas.

Role models



In the lecture, LTH's and Lund University's first Nobel Laureate Anne L'Huillier is put forth as a prime example of a role model and source of inspiration, no matter gender. However, you cannot overlook the fact that a female laureate in a male-dominated field – the fifth woman ever to be awarded the prize in physics – matters to other women and underrepresented groups. “Seeing is believing”, say the lecturers.

Why are role models so important?

When did women enter science and technology?

- Faculties for natural sciences in the 17th century
- Technical faculties in the 19th century (KTH 1827 and Chalmers 1829)
- First female student at Chalmers started in 1914 (Vera Sandberg).

Today, the women constitute 35% of the graduates with a master degree in engineering

35%

Chalmers

Professor Charlotta Johnsson lays out the numbers for women in science and technology in general, and for the field of Automatic Control in particular. Photo: Kennet Ruona

One of the lecturers is former Lise Meitner professor Margret Bauer, Professor of Process Automation at the University of Applied Sciences Hamburg (HAW). During her nine years within industry, she had only one meeting with a woman, and that was Charlotta Johnsson. Sharing a screenshot from her LinkedIn with pictures of groups of smiling engineers, Bauer says:

– This is the world of process automation. They are all lovely colleagues, but they're all men.

Eva Westin, who is the Administrative Manager at Automatic Control with a PhD in French linguistics, emphasises the importance of a diverse workforce in academia in general. She points out that gender balance in the technical and administrative part (TA) of the university world is the opposite, with women constituting a majority:

– This is something to think about, as gender balance within administration is important too. Homogeneity leads to overlooking the needs of everyone.

Some would say that we should not focus so much on gender – all that matters is excellence. By laying out the numbers, Charlotta Johnsson, Professor of Automatic Control and Dean at Campus Helsingborg, shows that progress has indeed been made. However, the numbers speak for themselves:

– The field of automatic control in Sweden is now 75 years old. The first PhD thesis written by a woman is from 1983, that is 42 years ago. Today, 35 percent of the master graduates are women, 12 percent of PhD theses were written by women, and around six percent of the professors are female. Automatic Control should be for everyone and developed by everyone. In order to reach excellency, we need to focus also on the gender issues, says Charlotta Johnsson.

The lecturers' own role models



The role models of Charlotta Johnsson are, among others, her father Thomas Johnsson and Carolyn Beck. Her father worked with airplanes and introduced Charlotta Johnsson to science and the field of Automatic Control. He spoke passionately about technology and encouraged his daughter to pursue her interests.

Charlotta Johnsson met Carolyn Beck in the 1990s, while Beck did her postdoc at the Department of Automatic Control at LTH where they shared office. Meeting a female senior in the field was important since it showed Charlotta Johnsson that this is a possible line of work for women.



One of Eva Westin's role models is her mother – “90 years old and still going strong”. Two others are Cecilia Uddén, the Swedish radio foreign correspondent, and Karl Johan Åström, founder of the Department of Automatic Control at LTH. What these three have in common, according to Eva Westin, is their never-ending curiosity, inventiveness, sense of humour and empathy.



One role model of Margret Bauer is her grandmother, “who never left the village but remained curious about everything and everyone”. Another is Nina Thornhill, professor at Imperial College in London and one of the women included in the project *Historical Female Influencers in Automatic Control* (Automatic Control's website) [↗](#).

Panel discussion on role models



The panelists: Laura Giese, PhD in Psychology, Knut Deppert, Professor of Solid-state Physics, Per Runeson, Professor of Software Engineering and Jessica Abbott, Professor of Evolutionary Genetics. Photos: Kennet Ruona

After the lecture, as the panel members get seated, the people in the audience are asked about role models via their phones. Most say they had one or several role models in life. Personal qualities that they associate with role models form a word cloud on the screen behind the panel – words like empathy, curiosity, encouragement and inspiration.



The panel discussion was moderated by LTH's External Engagement Coordinator, Louise Pierce. Photo: Kennet Ruona

There are also stereotypes of what a star in the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) should be, says Laura Giese:

– To become a computer scientist, the cliché is that you should've been a data nerd all your life.

– Yes, and the equivalent in my field would be that you should've been a bird watcher all your life, Jessica Abbot adds.

Per Runeson says that it was only in hindsight that he realised he had role models:

– My grandmother was a teacher only because the law changed to allow also married teachers around 1920. I believe she was one of the first working mothers in the country.

Can it be a burden to be a role model, if it comes with too high expectations?

– I think it's important to have a range of role models. If there's only one female professor to look up to, what if she 's not the type of person you want to strive to be? says Laura Giese.

Jessica Abbott concludes the panel talk:

– Being a role model isn't necessarily a burden, but as a public person, and Head of department, and so on, you must always think about what you say.

Also on the Lise Meitner seminar 2025

New and old role models

ngle at the Lise Meitner seminar