

Obituary

Joan Mason

Pioneering chemist who fought the cause for women in science

Anne McClaren
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The distinguished chemist Joan Mason, who has died aged 80, was responsible, in the mid-1990s, for setting up the Association for Women in Science and Engineering (Awise), which she chaired until her death. She had studied science at a time when it was not considered an appropriate occupation for a woman, but went on to do research, and later taught at University College London, the University of East Anglia and the Open University.

The second of three daughters, Joan was born in west Hampstead, London. She won an open scholarship to the prestigious North London Collegiate school, where she was a pupil from 1934 to 1941. Her father wanted her to study accounting and join him in the family accountancy business, but an intense curiosity to know how things worked led her to reject his preference.

Instead, she won a clothworkers' scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, where she read for a degree in natural sciences - chemistry, physics, mineralogy and mathematics. Her studies were briefly interrupted by national service research on monomers and polymers at ICI Plastics Ltd, but, in 1945, returned to Newnham to take part two of her degree, which was awarded in 1946.

From 1946 to 1949, she carried out PhD research for the Atomic Energy Commission. There, she discovered the famous blue gas, trifluoronitrosomethane. She then conducted post-doctoral research as a Fulbright scholar, from 1950 to 1951, at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, returning to England and an assistant lectureship at University College London (1955-56), with a seven-month visit in 1953 to Ohio State University.

It was at UCL that Joan met her future husband, Stephen Mason, and, at 33, she took a career break to have a family. She managed to write up much of her research during this time, compiling an impressive list of publications while looking after her young three sons, Oliver, Andrew and Lionel. She returned to academia after eight years.

In 1964, she was awarded a Science Research Council fellowship for research in nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy, while serving as a tutor and seminar leader at the new University of East Anglia in Norwich. She was interested in unusual areas of NMR research, and concentrated on how hydrogen and oxygen behave in metal complexes.

She was appointed to a lectureship in chemistry at the Open University in 1970, becoming a senior lecturer in 1978, and reader in 1983. She retired in 1988.

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But she then took a leading role in OU course teams on gender studies, and also joined the Cambridge department of the history and philosophy of science as an affiliated research associate. She centred her historical studies on the achievements of women scientists.

An energetic and committed person, Joan was as active in her retirement as she had been before it. From 1993 to 1994, she served as secretary to the committee that produced *The Rising Tide: A Report On Women In Science, Engineering And Technology*, which recommended that a networking association of women scientists and engineers should be set up. This was followed by the foundation of Awise.

Earlier, Joan had edited and partly written *Multinuclear NMR* (1987). She wrote extensively on women in science, historical studies and current issues, and was a reviewer for the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. She also served on committees in Brussels, including the one that produced the *European Technologies Assistance Network's Report On Science Policies In The European Union* (2000), and set up the *European Platform of Women Scientists*.

Last year, she was awarded the MBE for services to women in science. Her husband and sons survive her.

· Joan Mason, scientist, born June 3 1923; died March 20 2004

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