

# **ATHENA PROJECT**

## **Case Study No 13**

### **IMPERIAL COLLEGE LONDON**

#### **SWAN SILVER AWARD 2006**

Imperial College London, a founder member of the Athena SWAN Charter, was awarded Silver SWAN recognition in March 2006. The recognition award is valid until March 2009.

#### **THE COLLEGE**

Imperial College London has some 6,500 staff and 12,000 students. Imperial was an early advocate of the aims of the Athena Project and has been working in partnership with Athena since the Project's establishment. The College was awarded one of the first Athena development grants in 1999 for its mentoring initiative and, in 2003, received a Royal Society Athena Award and joint second place for the work of its Rector's Advisory Committee on Academic Opportunities for women.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The Academic Opportunities Committee (AOC) was established in 1998 to identify and address barriers to the progress of women academics and to create a level playing field for women academics. Since its inception the Committee has initiated a number of activities which include:

- replicating the MIT survey of senior women; creating an annual Athena Lecture

- a review of departmental and College promotion procedure

- the creation of the Elsie Widdowson Fellowships to provide academic women returning from maternity leave with 6 months relief from teaching and administration in order to refocus their research.

The Committee membership includes both women and men and always ensures that academics with family responsibilities are amongst its membership. It meets with the Faculty Principals regularly to review the situation at faculty and departmental level. It makes regular reports to the termly Heads of Department meetings. These channels mean that the Committee is heard at the most senior levels of the College by people who can initiate and implement actions to make a difference.

The work of the Committee is complemented by other activities within the College, most notably the Equalities and Diversity Committee and the Imperial As One Equality Advisory Group.

#### **WORK IN SUPPORT OF CHARTER PRINCIPLES**

The AOC and the College have together undertaken a number of surveys to explore the lived experience of women academics. These began in 1998 with a report by an external consultant on the experiences of women academics. This was followed in 2002 by a college-wide Equalities Survey also undertaken by external consultants. Most recently, in 2004 it commissioned a study based on ASSET which benchmarked Imperial against other Russell Group universities. These reports were consolidated in 2005 in an internal review *action for opportunity* which can be found at

[https://www.imperial.ac.uk/spectrum/hr/hr\\_Info/equality/academicwomen/actionforopp/index.htm](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/spectrum/hr/hr_Info/equality/academicwomen/actionforopp/index.htm)

The *action for opportunity* review has been used to set the agenda for the next phase of activities within the College.

## **Data Analysis and Reporting**

Imperial monitors recruitment, progression, development, retention, contract status and turnover. The 2002 HR Strategy set a target of a 10% increase in the number of female academics by 2005. Since monitoring began in 1998/99 the College has seen an increase in female academics across all the grades with the most significant increases at Lecturer and Professor levels (5% and 4% respectively). Clearly there is still some way to go and the action plans address this issue.

## **Women in Senior Management and Decision-Making**

As at summer 2006 Imperial College has a significant representation of women at the most senior levels. Women hold one out of four Pro-Rector roles, one of four Faculty Principal roles, two of four Deputy Faculty Principal roles, and one of five College Deans. In these roles they sit on key College Committees such as the Management Board (the most powerful decision-making body), the Strategic Education Committee, the Research Committee, the Graduate Schools Committees and many others. (Nor are they the only women represented on these key College Committees).

However, only one department/division is currently headed by a woman and the College recognises that more female representation at higher levels is needed. Such representation provides role models as well as the opportunity for women to participate in College decision-making. The College is actively encouraging the inclusion of more women on senior committees.

## **Promotion**

The promotion process is critical to women's advancement. The Academic Opportunities Committee has been reviewing the College promotion process since 1998. In 2004 it began also to focus on the nomination process at department level with the intention of making this part of the process more transparent and accountable. Following this review examples of best practice were made available to all Heads of Department.

## **Recruitment and Retention**

Imperial College has a comprehensive training programme to ensure that all those involved in recruitment selection, and promotion are aware of both the spirit and the letter of the law. The College's aim is always to attract and recruit the best qualified and most able candidates and to offer them a challenging and fulfilling career.

From its monitoring of turnover rates the Academic Opportunities Committee noted a higher rate of turnover amongst female academics and a rather patchy response to exit questionnaires by this group. The College appeared to be relatively successful in attracting women academics but less successful in keeping them.

To understand this in more detail and to address it, the College introduced confidential exit interviews for all female academics. So far the interviews indicate that the majority of women leave for opportunities at other institutions but, more worryingly, some also indicate that leavers perceive obstacles to career progression or lack of support from their Principal Investigators.

This data has led the College to a number of initiatives: a closer review of the composition of selection panels: the creation of a new – formally recognised – role of a professorial level Athena Advisor in each faculty to act as a point of contact and source of information for women academics.

The College has a number of parallel equalities initiatives which include the Imperial As One Race Equality Advisory Group and the Rector's Equal Opportunities and Diversity Committee. One action which has resulted is the introduction of short courses entitled *The Anatomy of Prejudice* for all senior managers and senior academics.

### **Career Progression and Development Support**

The College has a well developed and well used appraisal process called Personal Review and Development Plan (PRDP). These annual discussions cover each aspect of academic life: research, teaching, internal contribution and external reputation. Female post-doctoral researchers form a larger group than tenured academics and many are forced to leave the College when their contract terminates. To support this group the College has established a mentoring scheme. Each post-doc is paired with a senior member of their department. This scheme is only in its first year so it is too early to assess its impact.

One feature of the PRDP scheme is the provision for planning for training and development opportunities. This supports an allocation of 10 days that are set aside for personal training and development. The College now offers a wider range of activities to support researchers in their career development and progression.

### **THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS**

The assessment team comprised members of the Academic Opportunities Committee, Faculty Principals, College Deans, Heads of Department and representatives from the College HR function. The team will be supporting the AOC to ensure progress in the activities listed below.

### **DEVELOPING THE ACTION AGENDA**

Imperial recognises, from both its own experiences and those of other similar institutions, that it still has a great deal of work to do to create a truly level playing field for its women academics. The most senior academics: The Rector, Deputy Rector and Faculty Principals are all strongly and publicly committed to the AOC agenda. As an institution Imperial College is committed to demonstrating that an academic workforce that is fairly and equitably employed, remunerated and promoted is an achievable goal.

### **THE PLAN**

1. Encourage female applicants by using gender neutral language in adverts, having women on selection panels and similar.
2. Continue to support the careers of female post-docs through mentoring, through encouraging their PI's to support them, for example, in undertaking career related activities or other training.
3. Continue to respond to data from academic exit interviews.
4. Give greater visibility to the support which the College provides to its female academics through a strong web presence and more effective internal communications.
5. Create faculty based Athena Advisors and establish recognition of the role. The Advisors are to be a source of information about maternity provision, flexible working and other relevant issues for female academics.
6. Encourage Faculty Principals to hold HOD's accountable for female academic turnover in their departments.
7. Repeat both the "Voices of Imperial Women" exercise originally conducted in 1998 and the 2002 Staff Survey.
8. Instigate more publicity (particularly around the College Centenary in 2007) about the achievements of Imperial's female academics, past and present.