

ATHENA PROJECT

Case Study No 14

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH CHEMISTRY DEPARTMENT

SWAN SILVER AWARD MARCH 2006

THE SCHOOL OF CHEMISTRY

The School of Chemistry is one of seven schools in Edinburgh's College of Science and Engineering. The Schools and Colleges were created in 2002 as a result of a major restructuring of the University. The Head of School reports to the Head of College (a Vice-Principal). The Head of College is a member of the Principal's Strategy Group. Edinburgh has long had a leading place in research and teaching in science and engineering. In the 2001 RAE the College ranked fourth in research excellence, with 94% of College staff in units of 5 or 5* ratings. The College also consistently gains high ratings for teaching quality.

The School of Chemistry was graded 5A and the teaching rated as excellent by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. In 2004/05 there were 432 undergraduates, 188 postgraduates (all in research), and 155 staff of whom 73 were post-doctoral/senior researchers and 35 Lecturers, Senior Lecturers/Readers or Professors. There are five research areas including biophysical chemistry, chemical biology, inorganic chemistry, materials, organic synthesis, physical chemistry/chemical physics and structural chemistry.

BACKGROUND

The School actively supports its staff to achieve excellence in their teaching and research, while recognising that many staff have priorities outside work which have to be managed. The previous and current Head of School both engendered a culture and style of management that encouraged staff to manage their domestic commitments and not for these to be seen as having a negative impact on their careers. This positive attitude has benefited many staff who, consequently, feel comfortable with balancing work and domestic commitments in a flexible way. It has reduced the pressures they put themselves under, and has led to a healthier, happier and more committed workforce. The School recognised from its early experience that this approach made good business sense, and when it was available to all, was much more likely to be taken up by female staff.

The School has successfully used existing University policies and procedures to promote and facilitate equality and to create an environment where staff are treated equally. This was achieved without any extra procedures or administrative burdens. The work undertaken by Chemistry, plus their continuing serious commitment to equality, and work to further improve the retention of female academics, and the positive role models provided by senior staff, mean that the School has achieved what it recognises as the most difficult aspect of the change programme, namely a shift in the School's culture. The culture is now one which values all staff for their contributions, measured more by output than by hours spent at the bench.

The School made a major contribution to the 2004 joint Athena Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) initiative to identify and disseminate good practice in academic chemistry departments. Based on the good practice questionnaire (as sent to all UK academic chemistry departments and completed by 25 of them), Edinburgh was selected for a visit as one of five departments with what appeared to be good employment practices and a culture which supported career development. Edinburgh contributed a number of the examples of good practice used in the report. The School used feedback from the RSC visit to upgrade some of its practices. The College of Science and Engineering now recognises Chemistry as an excellent role model, and one which other SET schools now wish to emulate.

THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS

A number of steps were taken to gather and assess the data needed for the self-assessment. First the School developed its appreciation of the scope and history of equality and diversity initiatives within the University. This was achieved via the University Strategy, Equality and Diversity Strategy/Action Plan and Equal Opportunities Technical Advisory Group (EOTAG) reports.

A meeting was arranged between the project worker and the School's administrator to:

- develop an overview of the project and requirements

- discuss the timescales and set deadlines for each stage of the project

- decide which of the last two assessment areas to go for - work-life balance or champions and responsibilities

- and to discuss:

 - the history of, and background data on, the School

 - how the School has utilised existing University HR policies and procedures to facilitate the promotion of equality and change the culture

 - the initiatives and plans in place, and how they related to the policies developed by the University

 - the type of data that had been and was being collected

 - evaluation of this data

A final meeting between the Head of School, the School administrator, School Equality and Diversity officer and the project worker discussed:

- the progress of the project

- possible changes/amendments to the draft document required for assessment

- the remaining areas where additional information was required and how this could be obtained

- future equality and diversity initiatives

- steps that would be needed to move forward

Data was assembled using information from Chemistry and HR and analysed. There was regular contact between the project worker and School administrator, and other members of the self-assessment team.

Outcomes of the self-assessment

- identification of the need for good data capture to measure the long-term effectiveness of schemes in place (anecdotal evidence was available, but the School was currently not capturing and recording what would be useful data)

- the importance of the School ethic in creating an environment that respected the work/life balance and led to the improvement of the working life of all staff members

- what had worked was combining the ethic with the principle of flexibility (Chemistry does not have detailed written procedures but used the University's policies as the basis for considering individual situations on their merits) with the result that a number of staff, male and female, have adopted flexible working for a wide range of reasons, including family and study related.

- an awareness of the challenge of balancing the importance of women's involvement in decision-making on committees and selection panels and ensuring that inclusion was not at the expense of their academic careers (with the limited number of women available, they became involved in a wider range of activities than their male counterparts)

WORK IN SUPPORT OF CHARTER PRINCIPLES

In 2002 the incoming Head of School completed a fundamental reorganisation of the School's management structure. This broke down the three traditional functional sections and introduced a line management structure, with a five year rotation of posts. This resulted in staff with senior line management positions who had very different outlooks and life experiences from the previous section heads. This was the foundation for the changes that followed.

The line managers were dedicated to creating a work-life balance for all staff, and to encouraging new ways of working. Simultaneously, the Head of School implemented and visibly reinforced (through practicing what he preached) a number of university policies, such as flexible working, and effective appraisal. This commitment, to the effective implementation of all available University-wide policies and procedures which were identified as helping achieve the school's objectives for equality and diversity, has perhaps been the most visible and unique aspect of the changes.

The Head of School appointed in 2005 was awarded an MBE that year for her services to Chemistry, including the public understanding of science particularly to secondary school female pupils. She is an excellent role model for undergraduate and postgraduate students, researchers and more junior lecturing staff.

While the short-term benefits of these transformations have already been felt (first female Head of School in the College, increased flexible working, an overall culture shift about how staff are viewed who manage domestic and work issues), some of the changes are still bedding in. The longer-term benefits of many of the initiatives cannot be evaluated yet, for example how the mentoring of female academic staff feeds through to an increased rate of conversion of researchers to lecturers, promotions to senior lecturer, reader, or to a personal chair, and improved retention of female staff overall. The School's initial evaluation of appraisal has shown that more work is needed to ensure 100% completion of performance and career review for all staff. This work is in hand.

The School's key achievement has been the change in culture. The resultant uptake of flexible working policies has put paid to the ideology that if you worked part-time or if you had a family you were not committed to your role. The change has ensured that staff are provided with the development and support (via appraisals, mentoring, PDR/CPR, transparent communication, development initiatives) they need in order to meet their full potential. Many of the obstacles to increasing the number of women in chemistry are disappearing.

None of what has been achieved would have been possible, and the changes would not have been sustained, if they had not been reinforced by senior members of the School management team. Their active engagement has been critical, for example:

- the Head of School reviews the action plan from the appraisal of each staff member
- management is open and flexible
- staff are told to go home if they are thought to have been working too long.

DEVELOPING THE ACTION AGENDA

The long-term challenge for Chemistry is to proportionately increase the number of women in the School at all grades.

The good practices that currently exist will be shared with EaStCHEM and consideration will be given to submitting a case in a later round for an Athena SWAN award for this research pool.

The School will continue to embed the changes it has made and evaluate their use and effectiveness:

- organisational change
- the implementation of flexible working policies
- career planning schemes e.g. PDR, CPR

development initiatives, such as recruitment, appraisal, and mentoring
the involvement of women in decision-making
encouraging involvement and understanding of E and D issues

THE PLAN

SET baseline and academic profile

1. A primary short-term challenge for the School is to address the issue of gaps within the data collection to ensure analysis of longer-term benefits. To rectify this, the school has committed to work with HR on procedures for data capture. Existing processes such as appraisal may also need to be adjusted slightly to ensure they meet the needs of staff, without creating additional administrative burdens.

Key career transition points

1. report to the College senior management committee summer 2006 on coverage of appraisals and career development plans for staff on fixed term contracts
2. consideration of changes to the wording of advertisements to encourage women to apply

Culture change and gender balance in decision making

1. review of School management structure at the end of the cycle
2. continue
 - staff meetings open to anyone and timed to allow all to attend
 - publish minutes of School management team meetings on website
 - publish teaching and laboratory commitments of all academics

Champions responsibilities and accountabilities

The School's contribution to the joint work of the RSC and Athena Project has highlighted the need to evaluate initiatives and Chemistry will work with HR to develop a framework to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programmes.