

ATHENA PROJECT

Case Study No 20

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

SWAN BRONZE AWARD OCTOBER 2006

The University of York, a member of the Athena SWAN Charter from 2005, was awarded Bronze SWAN recognition in October 2006. The recognition award is valid until December 2009.

THE UNIVERSITY

The University of York was founded in 1963 with 200 students. Since then, it has expanded to over 10,000 students and has 24 academic departments and a number of high profile research centres. From its inception, the University has concentrated on strong viable departments and teaching and research of the highest quality, within the context of a collegiate system for both staff and students. The University is unusual in not having a faculty structure.

The University of York has an excellent reputation for research and teaching. 80% of its staff are in departments that scored 5 or 5* in the 2001 RAE, for which it submitted 93% of its staff. It has been judged as having one of the highest performances for teaching quality by the TQA.

The University has 8 SET departments (Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Electronics, Environment, Mathematics, Physics and Psychology). It currently employs 1175 academic and research staff, 54% of whom are in SET disciplines.

BACKGROUND

Ensuring equality of opportunity is a key theme at York and the Athena SWAN Charter was seen as a useful external benchmark of its achievements to date. Prior to becoming a Charter member in 2005, the University was involved in the Royal Society of Chemistry Athena Project to which it contributed a number of examples of good practice. York's SWAN bronze submission arose from work undertaken on improving its research performance.

The Athena SWAN project has been given support at the highest levels of the university and by the Heads of SET departments, many of whom are now working on departmental SWAN submissions. Participation in Athena SWAN has sent a strong signal that the senior management of the university is committed to the aims of Athena and has revitalised the efforts of SET departments. It has encouraged the collection and dissemination of best practice and administratively it has highlighted the wide range of initiatives that are already in place. SWAN has galvanised activity at departmental level and has given the opportunity for senior staff to reaffirm their commitment to gender equality, particularly in SET.

WORK IN SUPPORT OF CHARTER PRINCIPLES

York is working to attract women into science and to retain those who might otherwise drift away by introducing more flexibility into the workforce. The University already has a number of facilities in place to support women, such as a University nursery and a childcare voucher scheme, and will be introducing flexible working schemes across the University as far as practicable. The University was able to submit one of the highest proportions of staff in the 2001 RAE, which suggests that once staff are in post, they are all able to benefit from the opportunity to undertake high quality research.

One of the benefits for York of participating in Athena SWAN has been the opportunity to identify the wide range of EO projects that are already being undertaken, or are being put into action, including: a mentoring system for women in science, women in science awareness-raising sessions, the introduction of a revised pay framework (which is intended to remove some of the barriers at transition points), a review of the performance review (appraisal) mechanism and a linking of the HR targets to departmental agendas.

The University has an agreement with its unions on the policy of transferring staff to open contracts, it offers specific training for contract research staff, and has opened its research pump priming schemes to all staff.

All roles within the University have recently been reviewed using HERA (Higher Education Role Analysis) methodology prior to the introduction of a new pay framework, which is intended to remove some of the barriers to progression, particularly for women.

York has improved the number of women in senior decision-making positions, including the Deputy Vice Chancellor, the Registrar, the Director of HR and one of the Pro-Vice-Chancellors. It also has a number of excellent, high calibre female scientists at professorial level. However it recognises that progress needs to be made throughout the organisation, particularly at professorial and head of department level (there are no female heads of SET departments). There is a four year rotation of the headships of academic departments which should create opportunities for both men and women.

THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The development of York's SWAN bid was led by a working group, chaired by the university's Pro Vice Chancellor for research, and supported by the research policy office, with input from the university's Personnel Department and Equal Opportunities Office. The working group reported directly to the university research committee.

Science departments supported the initiative with involvement from staff in Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Electronics, Environment, Health Sciences, Mathematics, Physics and Psychology. Heads of Department were expected either to attend meetings, in person, or to ensure that an alternate attended. The process was driven by the Research Policy Office. This ensured that the project was fully embedded in the University's research strategy, was not viewed solely as an HR initiative, and acknowledged lack of equality as a potential barrier to the research excellence of the institution.

The inclusive nature of the working group, which monitored the assessment process, ensured that those interested in the project were kept well informed. Other staff have also been informed, through the University magazine and website. Departmental representatives have acted as conduits between departments and the group. This has provided a useful mechanism for identifying activities and for highlighting areas of best practice as well as specific challenges faced within departments.

Much of the data, from both internal and external sources, used by the group was readily available, but had not previously been disseminated widely. The baseline data generated from national (HESA, Institute of Physics, and Royal Society of Chemistry) statistics, internal HR and EO data and national student numbers for SET disciplines, provided the background to the group's work in identifying the points at which females were lost from the sciences.

DEVELOPING THE ACTION AGENDA

Recommendations from an internal report on the barriers to women's achievements were used to inform York's 2001/04 HR strategy. A report earlier in 2006 on the training and development provision for researchers identified key issues and staff attitudes and gave the University an understanding of barriers and where support was needed. Proposals were developed for better and more targeted training and mentoring.

One of York's objectives in applying for Athena SWAN recognition was to allow the University to identify best practice in the recruitment and retention of high quality staff. It saw the need to make sure that York was not only a place in which staff, regardless of gender, can flourish, but one that was recognised and validated externally as such.

The increase in female role models it is working towards is expected to encourage potential female students to first study science disciplines and then to consider careers in the SET disciplines. This virtuous circle whereby strong female staff role models encourage female students to remain in academia would be a significant benefit not just to the University but to SET as a whole.

York recognises that it needs time to monitor the impact/effectiveness of developments, such as:

- the introduction of a new framework for pay

- the four year rotation of academic department headships

- a revised mentoring schemes

- understanding the perceived barriers and identifying whether there is a difference in the level of encouragement that individuals receive.

THE PLAN

Departments will be encouraged to monitor performance and to highlight areas of best practice as part of their submissions for Athena SWAN awards later in 2006. These will be overseen by the Athena SWAN Working Group.

The administrative officers involved in the Athena SWAN project will continue to meet in order to co-ordinate York's EO activities. This should allow each activity to be more widely promoted and to have a greater impact. It will also allow the identification of best practice. The benefits of these informal meetings have already begun to be noted.

All the planned Athena SWAN activities fit firmly within the framework of university strategic planning (the Corporate Plan, the HR Strategy, the EO Policy and the Research Strategy) all of which seek to allow staff the opportunity to be as productive as possible, regardless of status. The University recognises that its aim to recruit and retain the best staff, will only succeed if the University is an attractive working environment for potential applicants, regardless of gender-

- The EO office and research policy officer will review the information supplied on marketing images of women scientists

- Women in science programmes and activities will be developed

- Administrative officers involved in the Athena SWAN project will continue to meet in order to co-ordinate the EO activities of the institution to allow activities to have a greater impact and to identify.

- Departments will be encouraged to monitor performance and to highlight areas of best practice as part of their submissions further Athena SWAN.

Career progression

There is a planned collaboration with an external research project on the practice and organisation of academic research in the sciences and social sciences in order to help departments to understand the barriers to women in SET and to inform university and departmental strategies.

Based on the 2006 report on training and development provision for researchers, the following are planned:

- a new inter-departmental mentoring scheme for women academic and research staff in science disciplines

- a framework and tools for personal and career development planning for all staff

During 2006/07, the personnel office will take the lead in a review of the university's performance review (appraisal) process, to-

encourage women to identify their aspirations and to offer appropriate support

identify barriers to progression and inform university managers accordingly

work to raise the number of female applicants for posts

and will require departments to consider the ways in which they encourage female staff to apply for promotion or posts.

Baseline data

Work to be completed by the personnel office in 2006/07 includes the following, which are designed to generate a more robust baseline data on which to monitor performance.

Based on its analysis of its SET data analysis, a refining and review of targets in the university's EO operational plan.

An equal pay audit, to be conducted following the implementation of the revised pay framework

A review of the use of exit interviews to gain insights into the barriers that individuals may face at York.

As part of the Research Assessment Exercise, the Research Policy Office will ensure that an equality audit of the submission is undertaken in 2007.

In order to raise the awareness of academic departments, the action taken by them in response to statistics (their own, HESA, and benchmarking information from the RSC and IOP) will be monitored.

Decision making

By 2007 all University committees will be required to have embedded equal opportunities in their terms of reference.

During 2006/07 the Athena SWAN working group will review the gender mix of decision making bodies at departmental level and the equality of opportunity to serve on such bodies. This review will necessarily need to recognise the competing demands on the limited number of females in some departments.