

## **ATHENA SWAN CHARTER**

### **Case Study No 22**

#### **UNIVERSITY OF YORK, DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY**

#### **SWAN SILVER AWARD MARCH 2007**

The University of York, a member of the Athena SWAN Charter since 2005, was awarded Bronze SWAN recognition in October 2006. The Department of Biology was awarded Silver recognition in March 2007, valid until December 2010.

#### **THE DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY**

The Department of Biology at York University is one of the leading centres for biological teaching and research in the UK (RAE grade 5). There are over 200 scientific staff in the Department, including academics, Independent Research Fellows and post-doctoral researchers. Women comprise more than 25% of the Department's professoriate.

The Department incorporates a number of research foci, including the Immunology and Infection Unit and CNAP (the Centre for Novel Agricultural Products).

The Biology Department has strong interdepartmental links, supported by joint appointments with Chemistry, Mathematics and Computer Sciences. York University does not operate a Faculty or School system and Departments therefore function with substantial autonomy setting their own agendas and developing their own culture.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The Department of Biology has worked to identify and introduce good practice in the management of academic and research staff regardless of gender, so that all staff can achieve their goals. However, the Department recognises that particular initiatives are needed to ensure that changes to practices are fully embedded and to break down potential barriers to women for a career in SET.

The Department has appointed a Skills Development Coordinator to support postgraduate students and post-doctoral researchers with a range of careers and professional development advice and opportunities. Activities include: a careers day for post-doctoral researchers with a range of science-based speakers; a 'Women in Science' session; skills training such as grant writing and small group teaching; CV writing and interview practice involving an industrial representative; and a 'media skills' session with local journalists. A website has been developed for post-doctoral researchers with a range of features and links, including a family-friendly web-page.

The Athena Swan project has helped to focus this work and has also provided an opportunity for the Biology Department's representative at University level to further her own career by coordinating this work. The Biology Department is committed to playing its part in implementing the University of York's overall Bronze Award plan, as an integral part of its own developmental agenda.

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

##### **SET Baseline and Academic Profile**

The Department's academic staff reflects its largely male history, but the ratio of women to men over the last three years has increased from 24% to 30%. In the undergraduate and postgraduate figures women make up more than 50% of total student numbers.

## **Key Career Transition Points**

To improve job opportunities for women, all academic and post-doctoral vacancies are advertised nationally or internationally. Interviews always involve mixed-gender panels; every effort is made to provide external panelists, and a range of selection processes is used to enable all applications to receive full consideration regardless of gender.

The Department operates a system of Performance Review for all staff that provides them with dedicated time to discuss their development needs and career aspirations, as some women tend not to ask for advice or support or to put themselves forward for new opportunities. The system has operated for 3 years and the Department is now looking at ways to improve the content of the discussions.

The Department proactively encourages applications for promotion from staff. This may be from mentors or Performance Reviewers, or by the Head of Department identifying an individual at an appropriate stage of their career.

The number of post-doctoral staff on indefinite contracts is increasing and redeployment between projects and between groups is becoming more common and better organised. Job security for this group will continue to be limited by the insecure nature of grant funding combined with the highly-specialised skills needed in scientific research, but the Department is taking steps to ameliorate such difficulties where it can. For example, it will shortly introduce a web-page on which will be posted the CVs of researchers available for future projects, and external advertising is not required where an internal appointment would prevent a redundancy.

Increasingly, successful candidates for academic posts have first held Independent Fellowships. Independent Fellows tend to join the Department by utilising networks of contacts, a system which has historically disadvantaged women. So, the Department has introduced a new practice of soliciting applications for an annual, nationally advertised 'Fellowship Day', where short-listed candidates who hold, or are considering applying for, a Fellowship are given the opportunity to give a seminar and attend an interview. Candidates that the Department is willing to support are allocated a mentor to assist with their application for an independent fellowship, where appropriate.

## **Culture Change and Gender Balance in Decision-making**

Key academic and administrative roles are rotated. Decision-making takes place within committees and female academic participation is encouraged. Equal Opportunities requirements are included in the terms of reference of all Departmental committees. Feedback on committee decisions is invited during regular Departmental staff meetings.

The Head of Department operates an open door policy which encourages staff to discuss matters with him informally. Two years ago he started bi-monthly informal lunches to which he invites small groups of staff, such as junior academics, to share concerns and ideas.

New members of academic staff are provided with a timetabled induction programme which enables them to meet all key departmental personnel within their first month of employment. The Department is now reviewing the content of the programme to see whether it should be used more consciously to promote positive messages about culture.

## **Work-life balance practices**

The Department has attempted to lighten academic workload by appointing non-academic staff, where possible, to undertake essential managerial and administrative duties.

15% of Research Staff work part-time but only two (4%) of the academics do (one male and one female). There are no job-share arrangements among research or academic staff. However, a flexi-time system for technical and administrative staff has operated for many years and has demonstrated that such

working patterns do not inhibit effectiveness or commitment.

Meetings, seminars and social activities are timed within the 9am-5pm period. Departmental social activity times are varied so that part-time staff will not always miss the same type of event.

The Department identified that, although staff with childcare responsibilities may find it difficult to undertake full-time employment, it has been virtually unknown for job applicants to request part-time work. Since it is likely that applicants do not wish to challenge what they believe are cultural norms before they are offered a position, recruitment literature has been changed to make the possibility of part-time or job-share arrangements explicit.

### **Champions, responsibilities and accountabilities**

The Department has introduced a 'Women in Science' day to raise the profile of the success of women in science, aimed at students and post-doctoral researchers. It has also ensured that presenters of the York Biology Open Lectures, given by distinguished scientists, include women who are highly visible as role models. These lectures are aimed at undergraduate level and above and are open to a campus wide audience.

The participation of Principal Investigators (PIs) is an essential element in supporting the careers of Post-Doctoral Researchers. However, the awareness among PIs of their responsibilities is variable. The Department has, therefore, produced a 'Roles and Responsibilities' document that, together with the review of the current Policy and Procedure for Performance Review, will ensure better support and advice. The Department of Chemistry at York has developed a similar document and it is hoped to share this good practice more widely across the University.

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

The self-assessment process was undertaken by a sub-group of the Department's Human Resources Committee, which oversees strategic staff-related matters. Members were chosen to represent a range of backgrounds, knowledge and career stage, and to ensure that decisions were owned by those with the authority to implement them.

Meetings were arranged to consider the data and existing initiatives; raise awareness of the Athena SWAN project in the Department; develop an action plan; and draft and finalise the submission, all in coordination with the University Athena SWAN Project Working Group. Members of staff were consulted on the project at one of the Department's monthly staff consultation meetings and plans for new initiatives were discussed at relevant departmental committees.

### **DEVELOPING THE ACTION AGENDA**

The main challenge for the Department is to reduce the attrition of females at critical career stages. Positive steps are being taken to improve the recruitment, retention and progression of women scientists.

Close analysis of the Department's own statistics and data and national statistics has revealed that:

- Female science graduates and postgraduates are slightly less likely than males to go on and pursue a career in academic science.
- Transition between post-doctoral and Lecturer levels appears to be much more difficult or less attractive for women.
- There is no evidence of females dropping out of their career path or being disadvantaged for promotion once they reach career level.

Improvements in data collection, particularly on recruitment, and information on opinions and motivations gathered in an online survey will better inform the plan. Gathering data on leavers, such as where they go and what are the reasons, will help the Department gain a better understanding of why women drop

out at post-doctoral level.

The Department will look at ways to maintain the range of activity offered by the Skills Development Co-ordinator once funding ends in 2008.

A range of other contributors will be involved in implementing the action plan, including post-doctoral researchers and post-graduate students.

## THE PLAN

### **SET baseline and academic profile**

1. Improve understanding of statistics through qualitative analysis, eg, Staff Survey planned for 2007; Exit Questionnaire for post-docs
2. Undertake thorough analysis of recruitment statistics as they become available
3. Review the induction of academic and research staff and performance review (appraisal) processes for those groups
4. Participate in a full equal pay audit to be undertaken by the University.
5. Undertake surveying of research staff regarding future careers.
6. Continue to collect 'next destination' information from research staff.

### **Key career transition points**

1. Implement the mentoring scheme for female scientists being introduced at University level.
2. Make 'Women in Science' day an annual event co-organised with other departments and addressed at all types of research staff.
3. Set up a Departmental emergency bridging fund for post-docs where there is evidence of how it will support their career progression.
4. Maintain and raise the profile of the Fellowship Day.
5. Continue to improve information and training available to early-career academics, eg, by providing short (eg lunchtime) briefing session from more experienced academics.
6. Ensure early-stage academics are given experienced Performance Reviewers once the initial formal mentoring ceases.

### **Culture change and gender balance in decision-making**

1. Consider which Departmental governance bodies could and should include representation from research staff and make appropriate changes to membership.
2. Develop a pool of volunteer research staff to sit on recruitment panels, not only to develop their interviewing skills, but also to extend their cross-departmental networks.
3. Publicise the initiatives and activities that have been undertaken specifically as a result of the Athena SWAN project.

### **Work-life balance practices**

1. Continue to ensure that staff whose working hours are not standard are able to participate fully in Departmental activities.
2. Advertise to current staff the possibility of switching to part-time working arrangements by including an entry on flexible working on the departmental website.
3. Add an official paragraph to the Human Resources webpage and in induction literature about the position on part-time work and job-sharing.
4. Continue the development of the website and other sources of information for staff with caring responsibilities.