

SWAN - SCIENTIFIC WOMEN'S ACADEMIC NETWORK



London Metropolitan University won the 2003 Royal Society Athena Awards Institute of Physics prize for its Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN) an innovative and successful interdisciplinary, cross-institutional network and the development by SWAN of a National Charter for Women and Science.

SWAN was set up in September 2002 as one of Athena's local academic women's networks (LAWNs). In the first year its achievements were above and beyond its original aims of the creation of a network for women in SET in the post-1992 universities in London and the south-east, hosted through an electronic 'virtual' medium and:

- the establishment of a website with resources, information and advice for women scientists
- raising the profile of women scientists in participating institutions
- the collection of data on staff career perceptions to inform the content of its website and to feed back findings to senior management and to equality committees
- providing networking and support for women in SET

SWAN was launched with a conference in October 2002. In its first year SWAN has developed a successful network and a national Charter for Women and Science. Following extensive consultation, SWAN will launch its Charter early in 2004 and will work with Athena, HEIs, SET departments, scientific and professional organisations to market and develop it.

SWAN was driven by a group of women academics who saw the need for some positive interventions in SET and HE. They were committed to obtaining the means to achieve this, a grant from Athena of £3,000. They saw the creation of a network as a springboard for raising awareness of the barriers to women's career progression in SET and in HE and for legitimising the introduction of gender and SET issues onto the mainstream institutional agenda. In order to achieve the necessary level of visibility, a broad approach was adopted on the network's membership. The network's launch proved an important catalyst for SWAN's future direction and activities.

SWAN is based in the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE) at London Metropolitan University. It is actively supported by Luton University and the Physiological Society and has over 60 members drawn from a range of HEIs and professional organisations.

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

The university was formed in 2002 by the merger of two post-1992 institutions, North London and London Guildhall universities. London Metropolitan with over 28,000 students and 1,900 academic staff, over half of whom are part-time, is one of the UK's largest universities. It is a major provider of business and vocational education for the City and North and East London.

Further Information

contact	Dr Louise Archer
email	l.archer@londonmet.ac.uk
website	http://www.unl.ac.uk/ipse/swan



SWAN

A project steering group was established with representatives from the university's science departments, the Institute for Policy Studies in Education and HR with a representative from Luton University. The untimely death of Cathy Smallwood, the driving force behind the initiative, was a significant loss to the team but drove them forward to achieve much more than they had originally planned.

The launch conference in October 2002 - *Women and Science: what are the issues? What can we do?* attracted a wide range of participants from old and new HEIs across the UK, from professional societies and voluntary sector organisations. The conference was successful in raising the profile of issues on women and science within London Metropolitan. The Vice Chancellor opened the conference and expressed his interest in and commitment to SWAN's work. The idea for the Charter and its first draft emerged from the conference plenary session.

Women scientists in the post-1992 academic sector are a group who are particularly difficult to reach and had been under-represented in Athena's activities. The SWAN network brought together diverse members from across disciplines and institutions into a strong and productive alliance. SWAN's website includes news, background and contact details, conference reports and an information and resources section. It has led to media requests for network members to be interviewed on the issues of women and science. The network produces a quarterly newsletter 'Swan News' which is distributed to members via email or post for non-networked members.

SWAN used an email questionnaire to raise the profile of its activities within London Metropolitan. The questionnaire was distributed to SET staff at London Metropolitan and Luton universities. It explored their experiences of work, teaching/research balance, the barriers to career progression and possibilities for improving the retention and progression of women working in SET. A short report of its findings will be sent to the management and equal opportunities committees at both universities.

The key factors underpinning the success of the SWAN network include:

- the drive, dedication and enthusiasm of members and co-ordinators
- the network's broad interdisciplinary and cross-sector membership
- the commitment and resources provided by Athena and the Institute for Policy Studies in Education.

The dean of science, heads of SET departments and directors of SET research institutes were generous in helping to distribute the questionnaires and publicity for the network and events. The Director of IPSE has provided continuing support for the network with more than matched funding and time for the Senior Research Fellow and the IPSE project administrator to develop the network. The network's activities have had an impact on IPSE and have been instrumental in creating a new research strand within the institute. In particular, the activities of the SWAN network have been integrated with existing research on 'gender and employment' and 'gender and HE staff' and have provided the springboard for new developments, such as the proposed charter within a FP6 European bid.

SWAN's cross-institutional membership and activities and its networking with a diversity of organisations, including academic and professional institutions and individuals within them, was important to their success in getting input to their charter as it developed.

THE FUTURE

SWAN has made links with other networks, such as ResNet at the University of East Anglia and the Association of Women in Science and Engineering (AWISE). It is planned to further develop its initial contacts with other Athena LAWNs and other networks and groups, including the Women in Science and Engineering group at Bath, and the Women and Science group organised by the Society for Experimental Biology.

ABOUT THE CHARTER

To ensure 'ownership' of the Charter, the network has engaged in an extensive consultation exercise with members and key stakeholders across institutions, disciplines and levels of seniority. The Charter is designed to ensure that it 'fits' with existing institutional demands and commitments, for example their wider EO responsibilities. The co-ordinating team are very conscious that initiatives cannot be divorced from the wider institutional contexts in which they are located.

The Charter has yet to be launched so its significance and impact is yet to be proven. However the level of excitement generated so far suggests it has a great potential. Next SWAN plans to seek funding to support the development of a modification of the charter for /with the professional societies. Initial interest has been secured from members of the Biosciences Federation. Existing contacts with the Institute of Physics and from the Royal Society of Chemistry will also be developed.

At European level, the co-ordinating team is currently examining the potential for dissemination with an FP6 Network of Excellence proposal. Based on the SWAN Charter, the proposed Developing Identity and Citizenship in Europe (DICE) Network is looking to develop a general charter on gender and equality of opportunity. This would represent a significant opportunity to raise awareness of career issues for women in SET within a major international and interdisciplinary forum.

The rationale for the Charter's development was twofold, the sector was losing out due to the under-valuation and under-employment of women and women in SET were disadvantaged in terms of retention and progression. The aims of the Charter are to:

- complement existing policies with a specific women and science focus
- enable HEIs to pledge formalised statements of support and develop action plans for change
- inform policy and practice via a broad based bottom up approach

The Charter is targeted at four levels:

- Policy makers- to create the conditions and structures for change
- Vice-Chancellors - to facilitate institutional changes and publicise HEI commitment
- Heads of department - to change practice at a local level
- The public - to encourage perceptions of science as a desirable and achievable career for women

The Charter is seen as a working document, not another layer of bureaucracy. HEIs can choose to sign up to all or to parts of the charter. HEIs who sign up will be named on the Charter and on the Charter website and will get positive publicity as an employer and somewhere to study. The Charter has three tiers of commitment-

- Acknowledgement of the issues by the Vice-Chancellor or Principal
- Action for the Institution
- Action for SET departments

The Charter flags the actions which may help to bring positive change. The web version of the Charter will provide links to the good practice reports and case studies on the Athena website www.eteachb.co.uk/athena which provide practical guidance on what can be done.

THE SWAN CHARTER

Part One: Acknowledgement of the Issues by Vice Chancellors and Principals

- 1.1. Addressing gender inequalities requires commitment and action from everyone, at all levels in an organisation
- 1.2. Tackling the unequal representation of women in science will require changing cultures and attitudes within institutions
- 1.3. The high 'churn rate' of women in SET is an urgent concern that needs to be addressed in each institution
- 1.4. Increased reliance upon short-term contracts can have particularly negative consequences for the retention/progression of women in science
- 1.5. The transition from PhD to academic career can be particularly difficult for women in science and deserves consideration by each institution
- 1.6. Lack of diversity at management and policy-making levels entails broader implications for an organisation that should be examined

Part Two: Actions for the Institution

Signatories pledge that their institution will monitor its progress towards an institutional culture, where all can thrive, are equally valued and experience equality of opportunity for career progression. Signatories pledge to provide an annual account of this and future plans for improvement. Actions may include:

- 2.1 Addressing the marginalisation of gender/SET issues by naming and resourcing three 'champions' to make links both internally and externally to the organisation- a senior manager, a head of department/head of research group/PI and a woman scientist
- 2.2 Collecting and analysing data on 'churn rates' and developing actions in response
- 2.3 Adopting proactive approaches to

issues of organisational cultures and management to improve career options and support for women in SET

- 2.4 Reviewing, supporting and facilitating work-life balance practices
- 2.5 Monitoring and taking action to encourage gender-balanced committees and decision-making bodies

Part Three: Actions for SET departments

Signatories pledge that their SET departments will monitor progress towards a culture in which all can thrive, are equally valued and experience equality of opportunity for career progression. Signatories pledge to provide an annual account of this and future plans for improvement. Actions may include:

- 3.1 Developing systems to support and encourage the career progression of all staff to participate in internal and external professional activities and networks and providing appropriate support, training and encouragement
- 3.2 Monitoring, developing and mainstreaming systems to ensure gender balance in academic practices (such as conference/seminar speaking and attendance; participation in research groups and meetings; allocation of departments' roles/responsibilities; take-up of training/development opportunities and teaching/administrative/ research and fundraising work loads)

NOTE

An accompanying pack will be provided, including information and ideas, based on good practice collated from Athena, SET Fair and other key resources for Women and SET and ongoing support will be provided for all signatories.