

THE ATHENA SWAN CHARTER

By Julie Ashdown

Both men and women benefit from good employment practice; however, women in particular are adversely affected by bad practice. UCL was one of ten founder members of the Athena SWAN Charter when it was launched in June 2005 to celebrate excellence, and to share good practice in the employment of women in academic science, engineering and technology, especially at senior levels. The Charter is based on six principles:

1. To address gender inequalities requires commitment and action from everyone, at all levels of the organisation.
2. To tackle the unequal representation of women in science requires changing cultures and attitudes across the organisation.
3. The absence of diversity at management and policy-making levels has broad implications which the organisation will examine.
4. The high loss rate of women in science is an urgent concern which the organisation will address.
5. The system of short-term contracts has particularly negative consequences for the retention and progression of women in science, which the organisation recognises.
6. There are both personal and structural obstacles to women making the transition from PhD into a sustainable academic career in science, which require the active consideration of the organisation.

Every year, universities and their Departments apply for awards at Bronze, Silver and Gold levels. 21 awards have been made since 2005, including the first and only Gold award for the Chemistry Department at York University. In 2006 UCL became one of the first universities to be awarded a Bronze SWAN. The awards are assessed on five key areas:

- Knowing the baseline and the SET academic profile
- Providing positive support for women at key career transition points
- Changing the culture and gender balance in decision-making
- Work-life balance practices, their introduction and uptake
- Champions, responsibilities and accountabilities

Case studies of all the award winners are on the Athena SWAN website, www.athenaswan.org.uk. These case studies cover practical advice and examples of successful programmes.

The key issues which the judges look for are leadership and communication. There really is no substitute for leadership from the top. The Departments who do best in the Athena SWAN awards, and in recruiting and retaining women generally, are those with a sympathetic and supportive Head. Clear and identifiable champions or ambassadors at a senior level can be invaluable in supporting women and promoting equal opportunities. Communication is also essential. All the policies in the world are ineffective if women (and men) do not know about them or are afraid to ask for them. Judges always ask themselves whether a woman recognises the description in the award submission as reflecting what really goes on at the university. The SWAN awards have uncovered some excellent examples of good practice: ideas which really work and which others could easily adapt.

Women represent just 16% of professors and 31% of senior lecturers in science, engineering and technology. In some disciplines, the figures are even more dismal. It's one thing to appoint women to senior positions but quite another to do this on a sustainable basis, and the disappointingly slow progress of women is evidence of this. Universities need to pay more attention to the pipeline of women moving through middle management, developing their skills and confidence for more senior positions. Promotion procedures should be transparent and should actively encourage women to put themselves forward. Selection panels, including ones for Department Heads, should ensure that departments do not select leaders in their own image, and do not use an 'Old Boys' Network' to make such appointments.

One university department runs open promotions seminars near the beginning of the academic year to outline requirements and routes to promotion, and provide a forum for general discussion and queries about the transition to senior posts. This is followed up with individual meetings to assess readiness for individual promotion and areas that might need further development. Another university appoints Champions to mentor and support candidates through the promotion process, including a dry run with constructive criticism on draft promotion CVs. More and more universities are ensuring that there are women on interview panels for both staff and students, including bringing women in from other Departments to create a 'pool' of potential panellists.

There are also a variety of ways in which universities can support the transition from PhD to academic career, ensuring that they keep talented individuals. One university appointed a graduate and postdoctoral training officer to support post-graduate students and post-doctoral researchers with advice on

career and professional development and opportunities. Another appointed a skills development coordinator to support post-graduate students and post-doctoral researchers with a range of career and professional development advice and opportunities. Activities included a careers day for post-doctoral researchers with a range of speakers, and training sessions on skills 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. Isolation can be reduced by mentoring schemes or by setting up early career self-help groups for post-graduates, research assistants and junior lecturers, and also by seeking their ideas on what activities they would welcome and what funding would be needed.

Fixed term contracts tend to affect women more adversely than men, but some universities do try to retain contract staff wherever possible, avoiding external advertising where an internal appointment would prevent a redundancy. Some have set up a Web-page to post CVs of researchers available for future projects while others have a register of contract staff to facilitate re-employment within the same institution.

One of the most important ways of making women (and men) feel more welcome and comfortable is to take flexible and part-time work seriously. The best message to send out is that long hours do not mean greater productivity. Many universities have policies which go well beyond the statutory minimum requirements, but it is important to ensure that these are well-publicised by, for example, profiling a wide range of flexible workers in staff newsletters, on the intranet etc., to show that policies apply to men as well as women and at all levels of seniority in the organisation. It is also important to encourage male participation in family-friendly policies to demonstrate that they are not the exclusive preserve of women. Some universities have made paternity leave schemes flexible so that male staff can take the permitted leave at various times within a specified period rather than in a single block. Managers should be open to requests for flexible working. So many universities give staff members confidence by providing them with guidance and training on how to manage flexible workers, particularly home workers. Family friendly policies, including part-time or job-share arrangements, should be evident in all recruitment and appointment material, so that potential employees do not feel unable to challenge what they believe are cultural norms before they are offered a position (job applicants rarely ask for part-time work.) It should go without saying nowadays that meetings should always be held within core hours (9-5 or, even better, 10-4). And the times and venues of Departmental social

activities should be varied so that part-time staff do not always miss the same type of event.

Finally, it is really important for women to be visible. Universities and departments can do this by promoting women's achievements in newsletters, magazines and annual reports. Many universities are now pro-active in seeking out women speakers for their events and issuing guidelines to seminar organisers about ensuring a greater number of female external lecturers and visiting professors. But it is also important to ensure that women are well-represented on key decision-making committees (such as those concerned with financial or strategic decisions), not just 'soft' ones (such as, for instance, those concerned with staff welfare). Appointments to committees should be transparent with the roles and responsibilities of committees and boards, and the criteria for membership should be well-publicised. Fixed terms for committee members can encourage turnover. However, do guard against over-use of a few token women – too much committee work can distract them from their other work and make it harder for them to succeed. For their part, women should seek out and attend conferences, ideally speaking at them too. They should also be encouraged to seek roles on external committees. A by-product of this is that it raises the profile of the academic institution as a good place for women to work. And a new idea is to use new media more, such as setting up podcasting and blogs for women at junior levels to raise the profile of their scientific activities. This can lead to other work, e.g. on the radio or in the media.

There is no simple solution to improve the representation of women in universities. But, as the Athena SWAN awards have shown, continuous effort, led from the top, on a variety of initiatives, can make a real difference.

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