The University of York

Report for Bronze Athena SWAN Submission: June 2006

1. Background

The University of York’s commitment to equal opportunities has been long-standing. It has had an Equal Opportunities Office (now comprising a team of three people plus administrative support) since 1998 and has collected EO data since 1999, long before such data collection was a legal requirement. It has also produced an annual EO Staff report for the past 3 years, which is considered by Council, the highest committee in the University.

Prior to becoming a Charter member of Athena SWAN in 2005, the University was involved in the Royal Society of Chemistry Athena Project and other similar projects.

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.

2. The Assessment Process

The Athena SWAN assessment was undertaken by a Working Group, which used information from a number of internal and external sources. Whilst much of the data was readily available, it had not previously been disseminated widely.

Baseline data were generated from national (HESA) statistics on staffing numbers, internal HR and EO data and national student numbers for SET disciplines, including information about A levels. This information formed a useful background against which to judge performance and identify the points at which females were lost from the sciences. However, one major limiting factor to improving gender balances is the limited number of female students in certain disciplines. To improve this will require national collaboration. The University is already active in this area, notably through the recently opened National Science Learning Centre (hosted by the University) as well as recruitment outreach programmes.
The Working Group comprised representatives from each SET department in the University (Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Electronics, Environment, Computer Science, Mathematics and Psychology), including female academics and Heads of Departments, as well as staff from the Human Resources Department (including a Departmental Personnel Manager), the EO Office and the Research Policy Office. Several of its members have personal experience of some of the challenges women scientists face.¹

The membership of the Group was fluid, in that Heads of Department were expected either to attend in person or ensure an alternate attended. The Group was chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and the secretariat was drawn from the Research Policy Office. Having the Research Policy Office drive the process ensured that the project was fully embedded within the University’s Research Strategy, acknowledged that lack of equality was recognised as a potential barrier to the research excellence of the institution and ensured that the project was not viewed simply as an HR initiative. The Working Group reported directly to the University Research Committee.

The inclusive nature of the Working Group monitoring the project 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.

Given the fluid nature of the Working Group, it was agreed that a smaller sub-group would produce the actual submission. The sub-group was also chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and included the Director of the EO Office, the Head of the Chemistry Department and the Research Policy Officer with the secretariat drawn from the Research Policy Office. The sub-group also co-opted the HR Strategy Administrator. This Group drew up the submission and undertook the task of identifying the actions that had already been taken and collating plans and available evidence.

3. **Level**

The University is seeking **Bronze** status at institutional level. Whilst the University has already undertaken a number of developments in relation

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¹ These include dual career families and balancing work with various caring responsibilities. See separate document describing the members of the self-assessment team for further details.
to the principles of Athena SWAN, it recognizes that there is much more work that it could and should be doing. In particular, it needs time to monitor the impact of developments, such as the introduction of a new framework for pay. It should be noted that several SET departments are planning a submission of their own at the next opportunity.

4. **Achievements**

   **a. Women in key decision-making positions**

   The University has already 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.

   **b. Raising awareness of EO Activities**

   One of the benefits of participating in Athena SWAN has been the opportunity to identify the wide range of EO projects that are already being undertaken or that are in the process of being put into action. These include 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. It has also galvanised activity at departmental level and has given the opportunity for senior staff to reaffirm their commitment to gender equality, particularly in SET.

   **c. Raising Aspirations**

   The University has traditionally employed high quality staff. As such it was able to submit one of the highest proportions of staff in the 2001 RAE. This indicates that once staff are in place, all staff are able to benefit from the opportunity to undertake high quality research.

   The University is already strongly committed to increasing the participation of students in science. It already has a Science Education Research Group and hosts the Salter’s Chair in Science Education.

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2 See Progress Record Form (Assessment Area 3: 3.1) for further evidence
It is hoped that the recently opened National Science Learning Centre at the University will have a key role in encouraging more school students to choose science through its courses for primary and secondary teachers. This in turn could boost undergraduate applications from both men and women.

The University has already undertaken work on the issue of staff on fixed term contracts. It has reached an agreement with the various unions on the policy of transferring staff to open contracts, which has been identified as good practice. In addition, it has offered specific training for contract research staff and has opened up its research pump priming schemes to all staff, which all contributes to improving the career progression for such staff.

5. Special Factors

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

6. Unique Initiatives and Activities

a. The fact that the self-assessment process has been driven by the Research Policy Office is believed to be unique. This was a deliberate decision, to ensure that it is viewed as a way of improving the research performance of the institution.

b. The planned mentoring scheme for women in science disciplines (in association with the UKRC and part of POD Strategy) is a new introduction for the institution. Whilst all departments have mentoring schemes in place for academic staff, these have not focussed specifically on support for women and the particular obstacles that they may face. The new scheme (an outcome of a focus group) is planned to be inter-departmental, which should be beneficial particularly for staff in departments where women are in the minority.

c. The EO Office at York is a team of staff, rather than an individual embedded within the Personnel Department. The Director (75% FTE) began at the University in 1998 as an EO Adviser (20% FTE) but has

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3 Professional and Organisation Development
developed the post and is now Director of a team of four, all of whom are currently female part-time or job-sharers, operating flexible working. This demonstrates the strong commitment to equal opportunities within the university.

d. A web-based EO training module is currently being piloted and there are plans to roll this out across the institution in autumn 2006.

7. **Initiatives or Activities That Did Not Work**

The University set up a 'Potential Women Managers’ Working Group’, to identify and encourage women to take up managerial roles. The introduction of the Framework Agreement superseded the work of the group and so the group was disbanded, but a number of the Group’s recommendations were fed into the HR strategy.

8. **Plans and Anticipated Benefits**

a. **Relationship to the University’s Strategic Plans**

It should be noted that the activities relating to Athena SWAN fit firmly within the framework of strategic plans of the University such as the Corporate Plan, the HR Strategy, the EO Policy and the Research Strategy, which all seek to allow staff the opportunity to be as productive as possible, regardless of status. An aim of the HR and Research Strategies is to recruit and retain the best staff, but this will only occur if the University is an attractive working environment for potential applicants, regardless of gender.

b. **Objectives**

The objective of applying for Athena SWAN recognition is to allow the University to identify best practice in the recruitment and retention of high quality staff. It therefore needs to ensure that it is not only a place in which staff, regardless of gender, can flourish, but one that is recognised and validated externally. The increase in female role models is expected to encourage potential female students to first study science disciplines and to consider careers in the SET disciplines. This virtuous circle whereby strong female staff role models encourages female students to remain in academia will be a significant benefit not only to the institution but to SET subjects as a whole.

c. **SET Baseline and Academic Profile**
Arising from the data analysis, it has been agreed that the University will refine and review the targets in the EO Operational Plan. In addition, an equal pay audit will be conducted post implementation of the revised pay framework, and the use of exit interviews will be reviewed to gain further insights into the barriers that may be faced in working at York. These activities will be driven by the Personnel Office and will be completed during 2006/7. This should generate more robust baseline data on which to monitor performance.

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

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

It is intended that the administrative officers involved in the Athena SWAN project will continue to meet in order to co-ordinate the EO activities of the institution. 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.

d. **Key Career Transition Points**

A number of new schemes are due to be implemented during 2006/07, which are intended to offer greater support to female scientists, including the aforementioned mentoring scheme and review of the Performance Review process, and work to raise the number of female applicants for posts. It is intended to ensure that all staff will have equality of opportunity, including those on part-time and fixed-term contracts. These schemes will be led by the Personnel Office, but will require departments to consider the ways in which they encourage female staff to apply for promotion or posts.

The EO Office is currently reviewing the information supplied on marketing images of women scientists and the Research Policy Officer intends to review the images that feature on the recently created University Research website.
e. **Culture Change and Gender Balance in Decision Making**

As part of the duty to promote gender equality, from April 2007, the Personnel Office will be producing a gender equality plan and will update the Equal Opportunities in Employment Policy. As already noted, monitoring will continue on gender equality in promotions and recruitment.

The University has already been successful in improving the gender balance for decision making at senior levels and for appointing a number of women to positions of responsibility. All University Committees will be required to embed equal opportunities in their terms of reference by 2007. During 2006/07 it is planned to review the gender mix of decision making bodies at departmental level and the equality of opportunity to serve on such bodies. However, this will need to be balanced against the competing demands on the limited number of females in some departments. This review will be undertaken by the Athena SWAN Working Group.

f. **Expected Outputs and Impacts**

The Athena SWAN process has already reaffirmed the commitment of the University to gender equality in SET disciplines and stimulated activity in departments. It is hope that an award will externally validate the work already undertaken and encourage members of the University to continue with this activity. In addition, the project has created the opportunity to identify work that is already being undertaken by different groups and allow better co-ordination. SET departments are already sharing best practice which can also be shared with non-SET disciplines.

It is hoped that the overall outcome of this will be to raise awareness of the issues facing females in SET disciplines and identify barriers for career progression. By seeking the views of staff it is hoped that this may produce a better understanding of performance. This should then therefore increase the number of women in the disciplines.

g. **What Has Been or Will Be Learned**

It has become clear that the difficulties appear to be in the key career progression points: that is, women are lost at the point of moving to PhD, from PhD to Research Assistant posts, and from Research posts into lecturing grades. The University must undertake further work to
understand the perceived barriers and identify whether there is a difference in the level of encouragement that individuals receive.

There are pressures on staff, and the University needs to understand which are specific to female staff in SET and which are generic across the institution.

9. Challenges in Relation to the Charter Principles

a. Addressing gender inequalities at all levels of the organisation

As noted above there is a strong commitment from all senior staff, from the Vice Chancellor down, to address gender inequalities, but there is a tension in driving forward work in support of the Athena SWAN principles in light of all other current pressures.

Furthermore, in order for the project to work, there must be a strong commitment from Heads of Department. The inclusion of Heads of Department in the project is intended to encourage such developments.

b. Changing cultures and attitudes

There is a clear commitment throughout the organisation to equality of opportunity for all. However, despite this strong commitment the current gender balance in SET disciplines is not viewed as acceptable and it is agreed that progress must be made as a matter of urgency. At York, this is not about changing attitudes regarding the need for equality per se, as this is already well accepted, but rather identifying the precise cultures and attitudes that discourage women from studying and remaining in SET disciplines. Identifying the current barriers will enable best practice to be developed. Work must also be undertaken to break down the perceived stereotypes of those staff but also to challenge the assumptions and attitudes of other staff that women ‘don’t do’ science.

c. The high loss rate of women in science

The University has identified the points at which women are lost from the SET disciplines and will now begin work to identify whether this is due to the barriers that may be inherent in SET disciplines or whether it is due to the perceived difficulties women believe they may face. This is a complex issue, but it is vital that the University understands precisely where the difficulties occur and puts in place sustainable solutions.
d. **Short-term contracts**

The University has reached an agreement with the relevant unions on the appropriate methodology for converting short-term contracts to more permanent open contracts. The introduction of the new pay framework is also intended to support progression, particularly from research to lecturing posts.

e. **Obstacles to women making the transition from PhD into academic careers in science**

Whilst the University has identified the points at which staff are lost, further work needs to be undertaken to understand the nature of the structural obstacles that are present and which of these can be overcome by the institution. In addition, it needs to understand the personal obstacles that may be faced by female staff and adopt sustainable support systems to ensure that women are able to take advantage of opportunities for career progression. Given that an aim of the institution is to remove barriers which prevent staff undertaking research, this will be a key undertaking for the Athena project and the institution as a whole. There is also a need to ensure that all staff are aware of the mechanisms that are available.

f. **Absence of diversity at management and policy-making levels**

The University is justifiably proud of its diversity at senior management level, and the progress that it has made in the proportion of women on senior academic grades. However, it recognises that progress needs to be made throughout the organisation, particularly at professorial and Head of Department level. There is concern that the institution does not currently have any female heads of SET departments and that it needs to consider the diversity of decision making bodies at departmental level. Where there are gender imbalances, the need for EO training and work to ensure that all staff understand the barriers they may face is clear. Training for all is therefore being made available.