

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*
DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

Athena SWAN

Minutes of Departmental Athena SWAN Meeting held on Friday 12 November 2010

Present: Jane Hill (JKH), Fiona Frame (FF), Ottoline Leyser (HMOL), Janina Pirozek (JCP), Jon Pitchford (JP), Debbie Smith (DS)
Apologies: Hilary Jones (HJ)
In Attendance: Andrea Johnson (AJJ)

10/001 Purpose of Meeting

JKH proposed that the purpose of this meeting should be to go through the information and feedback provided by Athena Swan, cover specific areas, and decide whether the Department should go with a Gold submission this time next year.

It was noted that putting in an application is increasingly onerous and as the amount of information required will increase there will be a need to collate data on a more regular basis. JKH suggested that thought would need to be given to the mechanism of how best to do this. Some of the data that is required is more easily accessible centrally but the information will need to be retrieved on a regular basis. It was noted that sufficient data had been provided in the last submission.

The current situation is that Biology's Silver award has been renewed for 3 years. Only one Gold award in the country has been awarded and that is to the University's Chemistry Department. The University as a whole holds a Bronze award. Chemistry have had their Gold award renewed and it would be useful to get feedback from them on our application. What do Biology need to do to continue to make progress to Gold.

JKH reported that the Athena Swan University Group had met recently and sharing of good practice and helping departments out had been discussed. It has also been previously suggested that it would be worthwhile for Departments to peer review each others' applications, and it may be worthwhile looking at this suggestion again.

Chemistry had felt that a big point in their favour had been that they had a more or less equal proportion of women at every level (i.e from undergraduate upwards, and the same percentage at each level). For Biology it was suggested that consideration should be given to specific areas, such as looking more closely at the postdoc to lecturer transmission.

10/002 General Feedback

The documents provided comprised the main text submission with information given in sections, a separate document providing statistical information relating to the text in the main document, and an action plan. It was noted that information required had changed since the original submission to Athena Swan, and further change was envisaged. It was therefore felt to be important that a list be provided of what statistics would be required, and then from there it would be possible to work out who would be able to provide them.

Athena Swan had provided positive feedback on:

- The year on year increase in female staff (it was noted that this will be maintained)
- How Hilary's role had developed
- The comparison with the 1994 group universities

Athena Swan hadn't liked or felt that expansion/explanation was required on:

- Some of the statistics (small numbers).
- The transmission from undergraduate to PhD
- Monitoring of some of the initiatives introduced - eg bridging funds.

- The fact that 9.00 to 5.00 timing for meetings did not allow for flexibility.
- For a Gold submission the panel would have expected the department to have already reviewed academic workloads and the opportunities for taking sabbaticals.

In terms of the application, the Biology Athena Swan Group agreed that the presentation of its statistics as histograms would be better (this was how Chemistry had presented its data). It was also suggested that case studies could be made more visual with photos, etc.

The issue of whether to go for Gold in November 2011 was discussed. It was noted that the increase at lecturer level seemed to be fairly steady, and Biology would start at a relatively good level. Previously 60% of submissions succeeded across all of the applications that went in. It was agreed that feedback was sufficiently encouraging to go for a Gold award, and it was also noted that there was the possibility for submission twice a year if only a little tweaking was required. As the data has to be collated anyway, the Biology Athena Swan Group agreed to work for a Gold submission in November.

10/003 Collection of Statistics

It was queried how the Biology Athena Swan Group should go about collecting the data. There is clearly a need to decide what is wanted and to identify where the information can be got from. It was noted that Business Objects would be of help with collating certain reports relating to staff. Other statistics are likely to be available from Julie Lord, Julie Knox and Monica Bandeira.

JKH will compile a list of statistics that are likely to be required as a starting point.

JKH

10/004 Membership of the Biology Athena Swan Group

It was suggested that a postgraduate student should be approached to join the Biology group. As PhD students have representatives on the Board of Students it was suggested that one of the current BoS representatives be approached (although it was noted that the student representatives change every year).

It was also suggested that including an independent research fellow would be useful, as they are at a different career stage.

As someone needs to feedback to Research Committee it was also felt that Colin Kleanthous (CK) be approached to join the Biology Group, and that Colin would be able to serve on the Group as a replacement for HMOL next year. If Colin is not able to join the Group it was proposed that he could be asked to suggest an alternative member of Research Committee. JKH will discuss with CK accordingly.

JKH

10/005 Statistics at PhD Level

One of the queries raised was that the data showed a reduction in the proportion of women taking higher degrees compared to that at undergraduate level as this had not been analysed or addressed in the text.

It was acknowledged that there was a need to explore whether it is the case that a greater number of women undergraduates decide not to go on to do PhDs, or whether it is the case that Biology, as a Department, is under-recruiting. It was noted that 6 months after graduation the Department can find out what students go on to do, and analysis of this data is required. It was hoped that such analysis would highlight where female undergraduates are going. It was also felt that there may be more female undergraduates who obtain better degrees than male ones, and this is an equal worry, as it doesn't suggest that females are leaving science or not going on to further study because they do not get good degrees.

It was proposed that HJ could be asked to run a focus group to try and identify why women do not go on to PhDs. It was also suggested that second year undergraduates could be invited to the poster sessions that first year PhD students do, to see what it is all about and that they could be encouraged to attend as it is in part a social event. It was thought that it may also be worth while promoting the fact that female staff give a good presence in other areas (eg the independent research fellows event). JKH will discuss running a focus group with HJ accordingly and will investigate the possibility of second year undergraduates attending first year PHD poster sessions.

JKH

10/006 Gender of External Examiners

There seems to be a wide perception that external examiners are invariably male (though in Biology in the past there has usually been one female external examiner). If appointment of external examiners is based on individuals making suggestions then it was put forward that we need to ensure that some females are suggested. Academic staff could be asked to think about women that are suitable as well as men (and this could be incorporated into the email that Julie Lord sends to the Chair of the Subject Committee).

It was noted that John Local has suggested previously that the University should be more equal and appoint external examiners who are at an earlier stage of their career, as those at a later stage in their career are not necessarily the best people to do the job.

10/007 Supporting Partners

It was queried whether some mention should be made in relation to support given to spouses, so that the Department could show how support is given to couples to enable them to come here.

However, it was felt that great caution would need to be exercised as there are serious issues in terms of discrimination, and the Department clearly should not be appointing individuals just because they are married to other proposed members of staff. It was thought that expression could be given to demonstrate that we do not do this, but that support is available when both partners work at the University. To this effect it was noted that the University will shortly be appointing a Recruitment Manager and some Welcome Officers whose role will be to look at helping new academics, and that this is being done at University level. It was further noted that there was a service developed by the University of Leeds (which covers schools, etc) that the University of York has bought in to.

10/008 Job Sharing / Mentorship

It was acknowledged that job sharing is discussed in the University's recruitment literature.

From previous case studies it was felt that there is a general feeling about flexible working and that individuals not working full time are not 'doing their job'. This may mean that some staff will avoid cutting down on their hours as they would not be taken seriously, which in turn could have a detrimental effect on their research. It has been suggested that some staff who see colleagues regularly leave at 5.00 pm would see this as inflexible and resentment of colleagues who do this can build up (irrespective of the fact that much work may be done at home), and it was queried how best to tackle this perception. It was felt that the best way to address this would be through mentoring.

There are currently two mentoring schemes in existence that University staff can take advantage of. The first one - the York Accord Scheme - is a cross-organisational scheme and is based on the individual usually being mentored outside of their Department for things not directly related to what is going on in their department (eg for things like work/life balance).

The second scheme is aimed specifically for women and was introduced by the University about 3 years ago. Existing staff within the scheme are asked annually if they are able to take on a new mentee, and this scheme is organised via PoD. This scheme is for researchers as well as academic staff and although the aim is that mentors will take on individuals from outside their department, sometimes mentors take on a member of their department as a mentee. The relationship between mentor and mentee normally comes to a natural end (eg the attainment of a pre-determined goal, etc).

10/009 Conclusions and Summary

Following on from the issues discussed at the meeting, it was agreed:

- That Biology would put in a submission for a Gold Award in November 2011.

- That JKH would try to update the list of data required, and to see how this could be updated annually
- That greater analysis should be given as to why fewer women go on from undergraduate level to PhD level.
- That short updates on the current situation be given at academic staff meetings on a regular basis.
- That the information is filtered through to other parts and other staff in the Department. In relation to this JKH asked for suggestions of events she could attend to provide updates, and one suggestion was the Postdoc Society. This has been run on an informal basis for the last 8 months but in future it may be formalised with the appointment of a Chair. FF is involved with the Society and would be able to feedback from/to it the various initiatives suggested by the Departmental Athena Swan Group. Another possibility would be through liaison at general researchers meetings. It was also suggested that GradShare would be an appropriate body to address. This is an initiative aimed at PhD students and may be a way to reach more individuals. JKH will talk to HJ about this accordingly.

JKH

10/010 Date of next meeting: To be arranged.