

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*
DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

Minutes of the Athena SWAN Working Group held on Thursday, 14th February 2013

Present: Helen Coombs (HC), Jane Hill (JKH), Hilary Jones (HJ), Janina Pirozek (JCP),
Jon Pitchford (JWP), Melanie Smee (MS), Debbie Smith (DFS), Katherine
Wilson (KW)
Apologies: Neil Bruce (NCB)
In Attendance: Andrea Johnson (AJJ)

13/001 Minutes of the meeting of 20 November 2012 were agreed.

13/002 Matters Arising from the Departmental Athena Swan meeting of 20th November 2012

(i) 12/013 (i) Terms of Reference

It was noted that the Terms of Reference for the Biology Athena Group were now available on the Biology Athena Swan website.

(ii) 12/013 (iii) Data Collection

The issues relating to data collection will be covered later in the Minutes.

(iii) 12/013 Degree Classification by Gender

JKH reported that some data had been provided by the Centre in relation to Biology's ratio of female firsts and 2is compared with other Universities, and there does not seem to be any suggestion of bias. It was agreed that the Working Group should record that the issue has been explored, and no further action was required.

(iv) 12/013 Staff Numbers

The Biology Athena Group had previously felt that it would be useful to know which Science Departments Biology was being compared against, and JCP confirmed that the relevant Departments were Chemistry, Computer Science, Electronics, Environment, HYMS, Maths, Physics and Psychology.

It was suggested that it would be useful for us to also compare ourselves against other Universities, and that clarity was needed as to whom the comparison should be against. It was agreed that national HESA statistics could be used if these were deemed to be a fair comparison.

(v) 12/013 Disseminating the Information

The Group had previously agreed that data should be taken to an Academic Staff Meeting in the Spring term, and JKH confirmed that it was still the intention to bring a snapshot of the data to that meeting. The census date is now the 1st December; this would allow a few months to collect the data, discuss it and then present to the Spring Academic Staff meeting and others as appropriate. It was noted that this was ongoing, and this is the first year that this timescale is being trialled.

(vi) 12/007 (vii) Springboard Training

JKH reported that at the external panel meeting she had recently attended, Springboard had been seen to be a positive initiative, and so the Group were supportive of it being offered in future in Biology. HJ reported that two Biology postdocs had attended the recent Biology/FERA joint programme. As there had been a lot of external interest in the programme, it was likely that this would be repeated.

It was noted that the Springboard programme had required attendees to commit to 4 full days which may be difficult for some staff. Accordingly, the next session will be 8 half days which will hopefully be more accessible. It was noted that very good feedback has been received from everyone who has attended it so far, and the FERA feedback has also been positive.

It was suggested that changing the advertising of the course may attract more Biology applicants. HF reported that she had advertised the programme on York Extra and asked contacts to pass on the word, and it was agreed that targeting the Biology Postdoc Society would hopefully keep it active. HJ will ensure that this happens accordingly.

HJ

(vii) 12/007 (ix) Mentoring for staff and researchers

HJ reported that she had advertised the new coaching scheme to Biology research staff, and confirmed that she would re-circulate information about this and also about the new Vitae one-day career development programme for women. The take-up of these schemes can be looked at further in due course.

HJ

(viii) 12/007 (x) Staff teaching and admin workload allocation

The Biology workload model was discussed at the last Academic Staff meeting and the model is undergoing review, which is ongoing. There have been discussions with IT about not having to rely on staff to check their teaching workloads, or this information being inputted manually as the workload information could be established from other sources (eg SITS, timetabling). JKH will report back to the Group on progress in due course.

JKH

(ix) 12/007 (xii) Arrangements for staff taking sabbaticals is open and transparent

An invitation to staff to apply for sabbaticals has gone out, and hopefully the take-up will be good. It was noted that records need to be kept on who applies/goes on sabbatical by gender, and this year would be a test of how the procedure and disseminating of information to key people works in practice.

(x) 12/014 Engagement with undergraduates, masters and PhD students

The issue relating to the rolling out of the student culture survey will be covered later in the minutes.

(xi) 12/015 Feedback from the University Athena Group

At the previous Biology meeting, JCP reported that Biology have been asked by the University group to complete a questionnaire about our experience putting in an application and what has changed as a result of that. This has not yet been completed and is still ongoing.

JCP confirmed that this related to the University's proposal to go for a silver award in April. Currently the University holds a bronze award; the last application for a silver award in 2010 did not succeed. It was noted that silver bids need to show evidence of impact within Departments but it was felt that the University's silver bid should not be too departmentally focussed, and instead should concentrate on what the University is doing independently of departments. The fact that the University Athena Committee was positive and committed was good, but the Biology Working Group felt that the University group does not need to concentrate on what is being done in Departments, as this is covered in Departmental submissions.

HC reported that some University statistics, covering the whole of the campus, had been produced at the University Athena Group meeting on the 4th February. However, it was noted that some of the statistics produced may need further investigation, and that it would reflect badly on the organisation if an application is submitted with uncertain data.

It was proposed that JKH and JCP feed back to the University Committee about the concerns relating to the University application for a silver award accordingly

JKH/JCP

As a separate issue, it was agreed that once JCP has attended her external panel meeting it would be useful for her, JKH and DFS to meet to discuss what constitutes a good application.

JCP/JKH/DFS

(xii) 12/016 Biology Action Plan (iii) Seek feedback from Academics currently on maternity leave as to process and approach

JKH advised that she had not specifically spoken to returning academics, but if the group submitted for a gold award later in the year then it would allow time for Elva Robinson and Julia

Ferrari to be used as 'case studies' as well as any relevant postdocs and postgraduate students (although it was noted that the maternity process for PhD students was not known).

JKH confirmed that she would progress the proposed case studies for the next meeting, and would discuss with the postgraduate student who has taken maternity leave how she found the process.

JKH

13/003 Action Plan: Update on progress made and developing the Culture Survey

(i) Development of Biology Action Plan JKH reported that the feedback received from the last submission had made it clear that Biology's Action Plan was not sufficient for a gold award. Specifically, the Action Plan should not include things that have been done, but should focus more on where the Department is going in the future. JKH will therefore re-draft the Action Plan along the lines of what Athena Swan are expecting to see for the next meeting.

JKH

(ii) Biology Athena Swan Website It was noted that the Biology website was up and running and minutes of the Working Group were being added accordingly. However, JCP advised that the University Athena Swan Committee had asked her to develop a template which would be suitable for other Departments to adopt. Christine O'Dea has provided one and the information on the current Biology site will be transferred to the new template over the next few months.

AJJ

(iii) Biology as a Beacon of Good Practice JCP reported that Hull had asked her to help them with their bronze award application. It was also noted that Maths are now engaging with the Athena Swan process.

(iv) Membership of Biology Athena Group JKH queried if the membership of the Biology Athena Group should be further expanded in any way (for example to include the Graduate School Board Chair, or the Chair of Board of Studies). However, as it was noted that the minutes of the Biology Athena Group will go to Staff Committee (which in turn reports to Strategy Group) it was felt that further expansion of the Group was not required at present.

(v) Data Collection In terms of data collection, there has been a move to take as many data as possible from central sources, which has caused some problems. Although the student data should be better and quicker to obtain in future, as some students (eg biochemistry) are shared between Departments, the data are presented in FTEs to Biology, rather than number of students. This is different to what Biology has provided for previous submissions. It was noted that Chemistry have never included biochemistry students in their statistics, and although Biology could do likewise there would also be problems with some of the taught Masters' courses. It may be that Biology will need to present the data based on FTE because of this, but prior to any decision being made, JKH advised that a meeting would be arranged with the Centre and Biology staff to ensure that these data can be properly used and understood. **JKH/JCP/AJJ**

It was acknowledged that the University will want Biology to use the figures that are available centrally as the University submission will be using the same data. The software can probably be manipulated, but it will be important for all Departments to use the same criteria (eg FTE or headcount), and this needs to be picked up at the next University Committee. JKH/JCP will alert the University Athena Committee to the issue accordingly. **JKH/JCP**

(vi) Biology Timescales The timescale relating to presenting data to the Biology Athena Group was discussed. It was proposed that all data should be looked over in the spring term of each year, and then any changes can be identified and documented at that point, and new initiatives instigated as required.

(vii) Student and Staff Culture Surveys It has become evident that a better understanding is required about how staff and students feel about the culture of the Department. At the last meeting JKH proposed sending out a survey to PhD students. She had identified two surveys that would seem to be appropriate - one is a culture survey for staff and the other a culture survey for undergraduate students developed by UKRC WISE and HE STEM.

Both surveys contain approximately 30 questions and JKH read out some of the questions that are posed in each survey to the Biology Group as examples of the type of things covered. JCP agreed to test the staff survey, and similarly JWP/KW would test the student survey.

JCP/JWP/KW

It was proposed that second year undergraduate students would be the preferred target audience for the student survey. Second years would hopefully have gained some experience of the Department and would find the survey relevant. JKH will contact Richard Waites in his role of Chair of Board of Studies to ask him for his agreement to send the survey to undergraduates. If Richard approved, it was agreed that the surveys should go out (using SurveyMonkey) before the Easter vacation, and that they should be left open for two weeks. An academic staff meeting could also be used to alert staff to the surveys. This timescale would give the Biology Athena Group sufficient time to reflect on the responses received in advance of the next gold submission.

JKH

The Biology Athena Group agreed that it may be desirable to provide some incentive to get students to complete the survey, and it was felt that those who complete the survey could be asked to give their names to Jenny at Cookies, to obtain a free cookie. Cookies could then be reimbursed from the Department's HR budget in due course. JKH would speak to Jenny about this so that she knows what to expect.

JKH

(viii) Booking of New Staff onto Appropriate Training Courses JCP reported that although she had wanted Biology HR to book new staff onto appropriate training courses (eg induction, recruitment, etc) in advance of their arrival, this had not proved to be possible as HR are unable to book individuals on until they have been registered on the HR system as a member of staff. Instead they are provided with the information they need to book themselves onto any relevant courses.

(ix) Promotion Processes It was clarified that the Department's promotion processes have been reviewed and are in place. The system will be assessed on a regular basis. HC advised that Chemistry have recently run a briefing session for their ART staff in which the process was explained and timescales clarified, so that Chemistry staff have all the information they require. HC agreed to pass on a copy of the presentation to JCP, to see if it would be a useful thing for Biology to adopt.

HC/JCP

(x) Summer Student Scheme for Postdoc Researchers It was noted that the take up of the scheme that had been introduced had not been as good as had been hoped, and this may be because some postdocs already look after undergraduates as part of their final year projects. An email has been circulated to postdocs to encourage them to develop their own proposal independent of their academic Line Manager. It was acknowledged that examples of successful applications over the last three years are available on line, and formal feedback is available from Research Committee.

(xi) Performance Review JCP reported that the 2012 statistics did improve near the end of the collection period, but that the process involves a lot of chasing to ensure that reviews are carried out. JCP advised that she would be undertaking a full review of the Biology procedure this year as there is a need to change reviewers for some staff in any case. Clarification was required regarding the procedure for joint appointments and allocation of reviewers in these cases and the setting of objectives will also be looked at in more detail

The performance review form completed for the Centre now shows the breakdown of eligible staff and reviews completed by gender, which will make the data easier to keep track of in future. It was noted that a good return was important as it provides an opportunity for staff to discuss promotion.

(xii) Grants Awarded to Females JCP advised that a recent Wellcome Trust report had indicated that female researchers were requesting and getting less money on grants and were less likely to be "first authors". It was not known what data were available to support this assumption, and it may come down to many different factors. JKH and JCP will do some further investigating accordingly.

JKH/JCP

(xiii) Biology Social Committee It was noted that the Biology Social Committee is up and running again, and more activities are being planned.

(xiv) Valuing Individual Teaching Contributions Letters of congratulation are sent by the HoD to staff with excellent student feedback scores for their teaching, and it was noted that records of letters sent need to be kept by gender. AJJ will contact Jenny White for the relevant information accordingly.

AJJ

JKH also advised that she would contact Jenny White and ask her for feedback scores for staff shown by gender.

JKH

13/004 Update on the Provision of Statistics

JKH suggested that the way data are presented in future should change so that it is in line with what other good applications for awards are doing. Thus, only female percentages would be shown in the main body of the chart, and including sample sizes/total numbers. The final bar in the chart would show benchmarking data.

It was also noted that it is possible to submit applications to Athena in colour, and this makes the charts easier to read. It was proposed Biology do this in future (although it was noted that hard copies of these would need to be physically sent in to Athena Swan).

A selection of the student data was presented to the Working Group. It was noted that the drop off from undergraduate to Masters was evident, and it was acknowledged that the Graduate Office could be asked for further information relating to the numbers of male/female home students and the male/female overseas students if this was deemed to have any bearing on the issue. JKH will investigate accordingly. **JKH**

Data relating to staff numbers were also presented. It was noted that relatively small differences in numbers affect percentage data. Similarly the number of staff has dropped and this needs to be shown in the charts; it was hoped that the proposed new way of presenting these data would resolve these problems.

It was suggested that further analysis of why postdocs have left and what they have moved on to do (where appropriate) may be desirable. HJ agreed to analyse the leaver information that she has received from that staff group and bring feedback to the next Working Group meeting accordingly. **HJ**

Further statistics would be provided at the next Working Group meeting.

13/005 Feedback from University Athena Group

JCP advised that the University have circulated a spreadsheet for Departments to use for recording flexible working arrangements. It was noted that many flexible working requests may simply be actioned by a contract variation form (i.e a reduction in hours form), and in these cases it is not necessarily known why the change was being requested. JCP will look into ways round this, and in the interim AJJ will keep records of all such informal requests received via the form provided. **JCP/AJJ**

13/006 Feedback from the Chemistry Athena Group

HC reported that Chemistry were concentrating on the recruitment and selection of staff and were attempting to make their posts more attractive to females candidates, by use of a template they have specifically devised for candidate 'further particulars/specifications'.

HC also advised that Chemistry are trying to look at harassment and bullying issues more, and want to improve the awareness of avenues that affected staff can go to.

In terms of the standard web format, Chemistry had opted to use their own template/format as they felt it to be comprehensive and user-friendly.

Chemistry are also doing some analysis on the recruitment of staff via direct appointments and named researchers as it was felt that these appointments are more likely to go to males than females. The Biology Athena Group queried whether this might be because male PhD students may be more likely to go to their PhD supervisor and ask them to be put on a grant than female students would. It was hoped that a survey of PhD students would throw some light on this in due course.

It was noted that Chemistry are intending to re-submit for their gold award in April 2013.

13/007 Feedback from Athena Panel Meetings

It was noted that JKH and JCP now both participated in external Athena Panel meetings. JKH had attended her first one prior to the Biology Group meeting. It was acknowledged that JKH and JCPs presence at these meetings would be constructive as it would help awareness of what was deemed to make a good application (i.e new initiatives being undertaken by organisations/departments). JCP would be attending her first Athena Panel meeting shortly.

13/008 Research Councils and Athena Swan

JKH reported that some research councils have made a statement about Athena Swan and have implied they will link it to funding in future. She would try to discover the extent of this, and the research councils concerned, prior to the next Biology Athena Swan meeting.

JKH

13/009 Proposal to Change the University Terms

The University are proposing changes to the teaching year by changing the timings of the terms, and it was queried if the Biology Athena Group should have a stance on what the preferred option would be as far as their remit was concerned.

JKH advised that the University was inviting comment on their suggestion to change to two semesters instead of the three terms. The same amount of teaching would be done, but split differently into two 15 week blocks.

One of the options is to dispense with the long Easter vacation, and instead just have a long weekend to encompass the two Easter bank holidays. The Biology Athena group felt that this was not family-friendly as teaching would be required during the Easter period, and members of staff would need to be around at that time when schools are on holiday. Another option would be to start the teaching year a bit earlier in the September. With this option the Christmas vacation would cover a 3 week period and the Easter vacation would be limited to two weeks. The teaching year would therefore finish 3 weeks earlier (at the beginning of June). It was noted that this option was probably better in terms of family-friendliness, but there were concerns that the two week Easter vacation would not overlap with school holidays.

It was debated whether the Biology Athena Group should have any other concerns about moving the term dates. It was noted that the 2 week Easter break would need to fall so that it is taken in conjunction with school term times so as not to disadvantage members of staff with families. It was also noted that change invariably puts pressure on staff and can cause stress, and there have been many changes to teaching recently through modularisation. If the teaching structure did need to change then the option to keep the two weeks at Easter would be the preferred outcome as far as the Biology Athena Group was concerned, but 'no change' was the preferred option overall. JKH agreed to feed this back to Richard Waites who is collating this information.

JKH

13/010 Brainstorming for new ideas

JKH asked if anyone had any new ideas of how to improve the visibility of Athena Swan. In this regard, it has previously been mentioned that an 'Athena' lecture may be a good way of improving visibility, and it was felt that this was something that the University (rather than Biology) should initiate to raise the profile of what the University is doing.

It was noted that Biology has a good gender mix when high profile external speakers are invited to give lectures, and so suggestions that perhaps one of the Biology Open Lectures could be designated an 'Athena Swan' lecture was not supported. It was noted that the recent Biology Open Lectures that have been held in the evening had been well attended, and so holding lunch time and evening talks has been successful.

It was also emphasised that the next Social Committee event would be a large family-friendly event.

It was proposed that if anyone thought of any new initiatives that could be adopted that would raise the profile of Athena Swan in Biology then they should be emailed to JKH/JCP accordingly.

13/011 Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Biology Athena Group will take place in May, and proposed dates will be circulated in due course.