“We want this department to be somewhere that’s fair to everyone,” says Dr Caroline Dessent of the Department of Chemistry at the University of York. “That’s why we have equal and transparent policies. If you don’t, it is known to affect women more than men. But when you adopt good practice, it’s there for all.”

With an enviable reputation for teaching and research, York’s Department of Chemistry has 235 staff members including 59 academic staff, with more than 750 undergraduates and 150 postgraduates. Roughly 47 per cent of York’s chemistry undergraduates are female, as are about 40 per cent of postgraduates and researchers. Around 25 per cent of the academic staff are female.

“We continually monitor these statistics and work over time to improve female representation,” says Dr Dessent, a Reader in Physical Chemistry who chairs the department’s Equality and Diversity Group. “Chemistry is traditionally a male-dominated academic discipline, particularly at the senior levels, and it’s typical for over 90 per cent of staff to be male. So to have over 40 per cent of our junior lecturers as female is really excellent. We are still a male-dominated discipline – but we have seen considerable progress in female representation across our department over the last 20 years.”

The department has won a record three Athena SWAN Gold awards, recognising a commitment to advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine in higher education and research. To qualify for the award, the department had to submit data on its female/male ratios, working practices, identify possible issues and draw up an action plan to tackle them.

“A lot of this information is sensitive,” says Dr Dessent. “For example, which people are being promoted, and what grades they’re on, who’s being recruited and length of contract. All of this work demands the time of dedicated professional and support staff in our department. Dr Helen Coombs, our Departmental Manager deserves special mention for her dedicated behind the scenes work on gathering this information. Although this is hard work, it has made a considerable difference to our department. If you look at our senior female academic staff, they’ve gone up remarkably from 7 to 22 per cent in 10 years.”

The Department of Chemistry has achieved this in part by retaining and promoting female staff, and by creating a flexible, family-friendly working environment. But the challenges are substantial. “We can only accept people into the department who apply to work or study here,” says Dr Dessent. “We spend much time working on our recruitment literature and processes, aiming to attract as many females as possible.”

Dr Dessent is keen to acknowledge the importance of leadership involvement to achieve progress. All the recent heads of the chemistry department have been members of the Departmental Equality and Diversity Group, including Professor Robin Perutz who began the Athena SWAN work when he became Head of Department in 2000 as well as the current Head, Professor Duncan Bruce. Their direct involvement has been crucial for enabling change.

“One of the most rewarding things is the way things have changed in this department over ten years,” she says. “We have male staff who work part-time to share childcare responsibilities. That is something unique in academic departments. It shows that our male staff recognise that our female staff are able to be highly successful scientists while working part-time. And men are doing it as well now.”

**A WINNING FORMULA**

The University of York’s Department of Chemistry has been recognised for advancing women’s careers in science.

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