University of York, Department of Physics

Narrative report for Project Juno renewal

Introduction:

This narrative is intended to provide an update on the situation since the Project Juno Champion award in key areas relating to management, staff recruitment and promotion, and student recruitment and learning. The second part describes our plans for the next few years to carry us forward, with the ambition to apply for Athena Swan Gold in the next period.

Update:

**Department Management:** The department now has a number of female staff in senior management positions including Head of Department, Chair of the Department Research Committee and Chair of Graduate Studies Committee. The Department is recognised as leading in the area of Women in Physics as evidenced by Brian Fulton, past HoD, becoming the Chair of Project Juno. Our Senior Admissions Tutor reports that parents, in particular, are aware of these issues and ask about it during our UCAS days.

**Staff Recruitment and Promotion:** The Department has been expanding rapidly – since our Juno submission in July 2011 the number of academic staff has grown from 34 to 46.3 to date. The percentage of female academic staff has decreased in this period from 19% in July 2011 to 17% currently. Whilst this is still above the national average (16%), we are disappointed that our recent recruitments have resulted in a reduction and have analysed the data on the recruitment process\(^1\). We have been engaged in four different types of recruitment process in this period: two rounds of “Anniversary” recruitments to celebrate the 50\(^{th}\) anniversary of the University of York which were managed centrally with an initial pre-section in the Department (3.5 staff); standard recruitment (10 lecturers and 1 teaching fellow), one direct appointment and 3 Chair recruitments. The latter are handled in conjunction with central HR and involve professional searching for applicants. The HoD sits on all academic appointment panels which are chaired by a senior academic, normally n HoD, from another department. We pay attention to gender equality at each stage in the process, from insisting that we advertise and search as widely as possible for applicants and that due attention is paid during the selection process. An analysis of the data for 13 of these posts shows that on average 10% of the applications were from women, 10% of our interviewees were women from which there were two appointments, 15%. There are significant differences between the appointments however. Some lectureships attracted fewer than 5 %

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\(^1\) This analysis covers the period from December 2010 to April 2014 to achieve continuity with the previous Juno submission and to bring the staff census and recruitment statistics into sync. The data for the Anniversary Chairs is not included as this data was collected for the university as a whole and not broken down by department.
female applicants (photonics and biophysics) and two none at all (plasma fusion); conversely the lectureships in nuclear astrophysics, low temperature plasmas and the teaching fellow position all attracted more than 20% female applicants. We would be interested to learn if similar disparities in research areas are seen by other institutions. This analysis suggests that the biggest challenge is in encouraging women to apply for these posts and we would welcome discussion on this aspect.

During the same period we have increased our number of research staff from 17 in July 2011 to 42, with the percentage of female staff increasing from 10% in 2011 to 19% currently. We have the recruitment data for 20 of these appointments which show that that 23% of applicants were female, 21% of interviewees were female and and 35% of the appointees. This is a significantly better picture than for academics which we believe reflects experiences nationally at this career stage, but the improvement may also be a result of changes in our recruitment processes over the last 4 years. We now pay the same attention to research staff recruitment as we do academics. A member of Physics administrative staff oversees all our staff recruitments, liaising with central HR Services. She aims to ensure that the recruitment panels have a gender balance, that the positions are advertised appropriately and that the Chair has undergone the central diversity training.

In our Juno Champion submission, the then HoD in his cover letter raised concerns about promotions and whether all female staff who would be eligible for promotion felt empowered to apply. We are now in a position to look at this issue in more detail since the University Athena Swan committee requested data concerning promotions over the last few years from the Registrar and Secretary. The data, for the University as a whole and separately for the STEM subjects, showed no obvious differences either in applying for promotion when eligible or in being promoted - if anything female staff were slightly more likely to be promoted than men and to move slightly quicker up the promotion scale. Recruitment was also looked at. In all cases, the quality of the data were very good based on 1000s of applicants. The data showed that in the STEM subjects, women were twice as likely to be successful (3.0%) in their applications for academic posts than were men (1.5%). For STEM research posts, 3.5% of female applicants were successful compared to 2.7% of male.

**Student recruitment and student learning:** Of our undergraduate student cohort, 18% are female while 23% of research postgraduates are female, representing a modest increase from the 2011 submission (16% and 20% respectively). In this period, we have significantly changed the way we manage postgraduate research recruitment, appointing a Graduate Admissions Tutor who is working closely with our graduate administrator to increase our marketing and recruitment activity including more open days and better marketing. In all our recruitment, we are proactive in the preparation of our recruitment literature, ensuring that a healthy gender balance is displayed and are mindful of the impression we give on recruitment open days in terms of staff interviewing, making presentations and student guides. We also now insist that all applicants for undergraduate places attend for interview, thereby ensuring that they are informed of the working
environment which we offer. A more detailed analysis of our undergraduate recruitment data reveals an interesting pattern. When we analyse our intake, the percentage of women in the group who made York Physics their first choice is high (typically over 30% in last 4 years), the percentage amongst those who come to York as their second choice or through Clearing is much lower, resulting in the final gender balance. This indicates to us first of all that we are providing an environment which is attractive to female applicants and they are making us their first choice. In addition, if this pattern is replicated elsewhere, this may indicate that there is a different recruitment profile for men and women. Currently, York relies on well qualified Insurance and Clearing candidates to complete its recruitment, but as we become more competitive, we expect this pattern to change, which may well result in a change in the gender balance of our student cohort.

In terms of student learning, a potentially problematic area has been the handling of extenuating circumstances such as ill health or bereavement which can impact on their studies. Historically, these issues were raised on the behalf of students at Board of Examiners meetings. This introduced a whole range of problems relating to lack of confidentiality and varying levels of advocacy from the staff leading to a lack of confidence in objectivity. Indeed, this was a clear area where unconscious bias could be very relevant to the outcomes. The University, as a whole, has now reformed this and introduced a “mitigating circumstances” procedure where a small panel is delegated to look at a standard form and accompanying evidence submitted by the student. The outcomes are clear and transparent with no scope for “academic judgement” which in practice meant scope for unconscious bias. It also has a much higher level of confidentiality.

**Future priorities:**

For the next few years, we have set ourselves additional priorities. While we feel that the equality agenda is becoming well embedded in the department, we are aware of the issue of unconscious bias and will seek to address that. Most significantly, we now consider ourselves to be moving into a phase where we are sufficiently well managed and large enough to tackle some of the more challenging aspects of encouraging flexible working and a better work-life balance for all staff. In addition, we firmly believe that a genuine plan to address gender equality in the sciences and Physics, in particular, must address all educational stages. We believe that effective outreach is key to this in order to encourage young people into the subject and confound stereotypes.

**Outreach and public engagement:** Historically, we had been active in this area but the impact of our programme and its reach suffered from being uncoordinated. In August 2013, an outreach officer, Katherine Leech, started in the Department (half-funded by the Ogden Trust). Katherine has the experience, time and energy to develop our outreach programme professionally. Importantly, it is now possible to be more strategic and target key audiences and also to track outcomes and impacts. A key component of our outreach strategy is attracting girls into Physics, as we consider developing the next generation of female Physicists to be a crucial aspect of
the Department’s role (see action plan section 1.3). Over 5000 school students and members of the general public interact with the Department through this outreach programme each year and there are over 100 volunteers working with them from within the Department. Of these volunteers, 36% are female and act as valuable role models. The high level of staff and student involvement also raises awareness of issues around diversity and equality.

**Unconscious bias:** We intend to tackle unconscious bias as far as possible. We will take more formal steps to monitor gender balance and a minimum quorum on all large departmental committees as well as our recently-instituted external advisory board (action 1.1.6 and 1.1.8). We will also add a standing item to the agenda of each department committee to consider at least annually how equality issues (in the widest sense) relate to their operation (action 1.1.9). We will also ensure that outward-focussed events like UCAS days provide a true reflection of the gender balance of staff (action 2.2.4). The subtler aspects of unconscious bias require a high level of awareness amongst staff and students and we will consider ways to embed this awareness into the way in which we conduct our operations.

**Flexible working:** While flexible and part-time working is open to all, the take-up in the Department is low, in comparison to other Departments such as Chemistry who aim to offer a return to full time working at any time for any staff electing to spend some period on flexible/part-time working (action 5.1.6). This clearly requires some level of management as it could strongly perturb a department’s budget. The thinking in Chemistry is that part of the reluctance to take up part-time working was more to do with loss of status than with potential loss of income. This is connected to inability to influence events and policy in the department. It is also clear that some of the current practices of the department do not make it as easy as it could be for flexible working, and we will address this through some practical action. We will establish a code-of-practice regarding communications with students (action 5.1.7) and between staff. For example, to what extent is it reasonable for them to expect staff to be contactable or responsive at any time? We have not historically extensively operated “core hours” but this may be helpful both in view of flexible working and in view of promoting adequate space for research. The ubiquity of email has led to students being more demanding and asking for more than they would have done if they had to ask someone in person. In some senses, this has strong advantages but students may perceive staff as doing their job poorly if they do not respond as quickly as other staff. There is a danger of a vicious cycle where students and staff peers nominate other staff for University/Department teaching/supervision prizes where their criteria are someone going the “extra mile”, which often means things like fielding student enquiries and sending on support materials for their courses late into the evening. The University is careful to make this distinction between excessive hours and excellence, but it is hard to change this perception without setting out clear expectations.

We will review, in general, communications in the department and email traffic. We need to recognise that, especially for those in flexible working, heavy and
unnecessary email traffic may be a source of stress and also make it difficult to keep up with what is going on. We plan to introduce a more structured email culture and communications structure and also challenge ourselves and each other as to why something was cc: all or whether information better belongs in a department newsletter than a message circulated to all (action 5.1.11).

Staff are able to indicate as a timetabling constraint their need e.g. to drop off /pick up children at school and this can be managed into the university teaching timetable. Out of line with this practice at present is the scheduling of meetings within the department. Things have improved from the situation only a few years ago, where e.g. Board of Studies meetings started at 2pm and went on often till nearly 6pm. Improvements to this situation have come about through more timely circulation of agendas and the introduction of timed agendas. The latter ensures both a timely finish and also allows staff to attend parts of a meeting which are relevant.

We have succeeded in the last year to fix the teaching timetable during the summer for the whole academic year ahead. This has made it easier for staff to plan their time well in advance, which is particularly important for those flexible working. We have only partially succeeded in embedding Department meetings into the annual calendar, but as the central management of our timetable has improved, we plan to revisit this again and aim to achieve this in the coming academic year. At the same time, we will endeavour to set some core hours within which meetings can take place e.g. 10 am to 4pm (action 5.1.9). We should also look to make more use of technology. Joining meetings by Skype/video conference happens occasionally but not for larger meetings like Board of Studies. The Department has already used video capture to record staff meetings where the HoD briefs staff on developments and plans. These presentations may then be viewed from the department intranet at a later date.