

## ● Notes from meeting for geography departments, 20 February 2017

The Society hosted a meeting for geography departments<sup>1</sup> on equality and diversity initiatives, including applications for the Athena SWAN Charter, on Monday 20 February 2017. There were representatives from 15 institutions present.

### Background

The Society is committed to supporting the higher education geographical community to advance equality and diversity in geographical teaching, research and learning. One route by which this is being addressed in institutions is through the Equality Challenge Unit's (ECU) *Athena SWAN* Charter Mark (for gender equality) and *Race Equality* Charter Mark. Further ways in which the Society is providing support equality and diversity in geography may be found on our website, at: [www.rgs.org/equalitydiversity](http://www.rgs.org/equalitydiversity). ECU's Athena SWAN Charter addresses academic staff across all disciplines, professional, technical and support staff, and trans staff and students in relation to their equality, representation, progression into academia, journey through career milestones, and working environment.

### Agenda for meeting

The meeting consisted of presentations from departments and short table discussions on a range of themes:

Departmental reflections on Athena SWAN journeys:

- Alison Blunt, Queen Mary, University of London
- Tristan Sturm, Queen's University Belfast

Lessons from being a panel assessor/ panel feedback

- Becky Briant, Birkbeck, University of London
- Keith Bennett, University of St Andrews (via notes)

Themed table discussions and feedback on challenges and opportunities:

- Influencing cultural change
- Applications across large/diverse faculty / 'straddled' departments
- Supporting professional services staff
- Pipelines and supporting progression

Slides and other resources from these presentations are available for download at [www.rgs.org/equalitydiversity](http://www.rgs.org/equalitydiversity). Notes from discussion are in this document.

<sup>1</sup> Where reference is made to 'department/s', it is intended to refer to any administrative unit below institutional level (e.g. school, faculty) that delivers geographical research and teaching.

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## Departmental reflections on Athena SWAN journeys

*Queen Mary, University of London – Bronze award holder, applying for Silver*

Professor Alison Blunt (Queen Mary, University of London) described the School of Geography's journey to a successful Bronze application in April 2016, and plans for an application for Silver in April 2017. Alison co-chairs the SAT with the School's Head of Administration, Dr Anna Dulic-Sills. Although the School has a relatively well-balanced gender profile, including at professorial level (equal numbers), and an existing focus on part-time and flexible work, fieldwork diversity policy, and ongoing research on student attainment and success, there were other areas that benefitted from greater attention to equality and diversity.

The School worked with an external consultant to review their existing processes and communications, which they found to be helpful. They also found that dedicating a whole day for the SAT to review the entire application and all the data in detail (half a day focusing on staff data; half a day on student data, the latter including student representatives from the SAT) helped to form a clear overall narrative. The School has recently invited the Chair of a SAT in another department at QMUL to act as a critical friend and lead a staff focus group, which helps to share knowledge and experience.

An equality and diversity anonymous suggestion box has elicited such ideas as: including sexuality in the School's fieldwork diversity policy; reviewing the height of teaching lecterns in temporary teaching spaces; mixed gender toilets. The School also has an Equality and Diversity Newsletter, which reports on the work of the E&D Group (which includes the SAT) and progress on our Athena SWAN action plan, reports on responses to the suggestions in the feedback box, and includes a staff profile (currently featuring SAT members).

Alison described the time and sustained effort needed to build up a departmental culture and ethos that supports equality and diversity. Those discussions are now embedded into staff away days and central to the Department's activities through its strategic plan.

Work for the Bronze submission saw the school build on existing work through: an equality and diversity audit of School strategy, key principles, handbooks and marketing material (one area of change in the last case has been that while prospectus photos were diverse in gender terms, they often showed men working alone and women working together); including E&D as standing item on School Board and SSLC agendas, and in student inductions, reviewing PhD adverts, and offering unconscious bias training to staff. Looking ahead to Silver, the School has demonstrated impact within their institution (e.g. College take-up of the department's research on attainment and success; recommendations for childcare for Saturday open-days), regionally and nationally (through presentations and knowledge exchange).

*Queen's University Belfast – Silver award holder*

Dr Tristan Sturm (QUB) described the work of the School of Geography, Archaeology and Paleocology towards its Silver Charter Mark award. The School has recently merged with the School of Architecture, Civil & Structural Engineering to form a joint School of Natural and Built Environment. The School of Architecture, Civil & Structural Engineering was unsuccessful in their last Athena SWAN application, so the next faculty-level application (Silver Renewal, 2018) will be a significant challenge for the merged SAT.

Tristan discussed the differences in culture and activities between the departments making up the new faculty, and between the past applications from the different departments. He described the challenges of creating a shared culture of equality in a faculty split across multiple geographical locations. This prompted a discussion about the structure of SATs in large and diverse faculty (e.g. use of faculty SAT and departmental sub-SATs).

Although some momentum has been lost since the last Silver application, there are a number of areas in which the School has continued to make progress, including: increasing visibility of Athena SWAN and equality and diversity initiatives more broadly; staff and postgraduate student surveys;

Tristan, a probationary lecturer, also highlighted the challenges of making requests and influencing cultural change from a relatively junior position and with little historical knowledge of the department. Participants at the meeting identified at least four other departments where Athena SWAN champions or SAT leads were new lecturers or post-doctoral researchers when appointed, highlighting an area for further investigation.

## **Experiences as a panel assessor / lessons from panel feedback**

Dr Becky Briant (Birkbeck, University of London) reflected on her experiences as an Athena SWAN panel member, and on the feedback received for Birkbeck's Bronze Athena SWAN application.

Becky described Birkbeck's unique structure/nature (small department, 9 staff, with evening teaching for predominantly part-time mature students). She noted the importance of applications being made at the level of management/decision-making, and highlighted the need for the ECU to provide clearer guidance for small departments.

Lessons from her experience as a panel assessor included:

- Know that your application that will be read by HR professionals alongside academics. Describe your department and any peculiarities.
- There are tensions between the form and the assessment criteria: capturing cultural change cannot just be a box-ticking process, but then form tends towards that. A clear central narrative is crucial, using numerical and qualitative data to evidence your current status and future actions.
- Clear data presentation will help the panel. Use staff survey data in your descriptive section. What does the data show are the main issues? What actions are we prioritising?
- Set SMART actions. Use your staff survey responses alongside other data to create measurable baselines in order to measure change and impact. Put a named SAT member or group to track each action.
- If you are re-applying or renewing, return to the Panel's feedback (the Panel will see their feedback alongside your updated application). Show progress on original action plan.
  - For Silver applications, show ambition, cultural change, intersectionality and awareness raising.

Becky also recommended SATs use a Moodle page or similar as a central repository for SAT documents, and suggested that SATs should meet monthly in the lead-up to an application or twice-monthly otherwise.

Professor Keith Bennett (University of St Andrews) sent the following notes to share with the meeting:

*These notes have been generalised to protect the confidentiality of Athena SWAN panel meetings.*

The panel I was on was predominantly non-academic staff (mostly senior university admin staff). I was in fact the only member who was both academic and working in an area relevant for the depts under discussion. I think this is a bit unfortunate from Athena SWAN's perspective, as it makes it harder to pick up issues that are subject specific, either to give credit, or to notice that they were missing. It is also important from an applicant's perspective - the people on the panel may very well not be familiar with your area.

Much attention was given to evidence. Applications are scrutinised in detail, para by para, in relation to the Athena SWAN criteria. It was important that statements were backed up with evidence. It was important that

statements were joined up (for example, a questionnaire reveals concern in an area, this is discussed, a remedy is developed, it is included in the action plan).

Head of Dept letter is important. It should not only be enthusiastic, but should also include examples of specific changes that have been especially helpful. In other words, also evidence-based.

The whole process of formation and running of the SAT should be documented. It is ok to say that some people were, shall we say, co-opted - just tell it how it was. The SAT should be as varied as possible, by grade, gender and anything else. Indicate roles within SAT and in writing the application. Be specific about meeting frequency.

Use data copiously and reflect on it, all of it, specifically. Try to allow appropriately for confidence intervals on eg ratios - not much can be done statistically with a gender balance in a group of 10, but if a group happens to be much larger, use some stats cautiously and appropriately. Keep graphs as consistent as possible, in colour scheme, and axes (don't mix graphs by numbers with graphs by proportions gratuitously). Data is required for three years min - but more is better, use it if you have it. Showing trends (or lack of trend) is important. There is a word limit, but not a data limit - use graphs to save words in the text.

Honesty is appreciated. It is understood that some things go well, others not so well - mention it, explain why, define the action. Gaps in data may well be noticed.

Action Plan should join up to the text. Within the text, indicate (eg with a bold number) which action plan item corresponds to the point in question. The action plan should not include anything that has not been discussed in the text. The action plan items should be achievable within a defined timescale, with people named as being responsible for it and for actually doing it.

## **Themed table discussions and other feedback**

### *Influencing cultural change*

Participants in this discussion covered:

- A top-down approach to cultural changes can be antagonising and patronising
- The challenge of “invincible” senior management
- Try to avoid your SAT having a simple/“predictable” split, e.g. by gender, or junior/senior
- Addressing presentee-ism
- Could there be collective/disciplinary principles for ways of working? Shared understandings for certain matters, or better ways of sharing good practice across discipline?
- Embedding cultural discussions into formal processes, e.g. making equality & diversity discussions part of meetings on other (“unrelated”) matters

### *Applications across large/diverse faculty / ‘straddled’ departments/schools*

Participants in this discussion covered:

- How do HODs collaborate within a faculty-wide process? Need for SAT representation and prompting; school management puts Athena SWAN on the agenda for meetings
- Data:
  - HESA codes – what do you use? What can we benchmark against – geography departments could/should share more information between them?
  - Are three-year data points too narrow for big groups
  - Aggregating data up, and disaggregating down – scales of analysis may not always be the same for each department
- The problem of survey data for “small” representations within larger cohorts
  - Women in engineering
  - Small departments within faculty of small and big departments
- More clarity needed from ECU on treatment of a) small departments, and b) large faculty cross-cutting multiple (disparate) departments

- The pressure of 'losing face' – what do you say in front of other departments?
- Challenge of different working practices

#### *Supporting professional services staff*

Participants in this discussion covered:

- Different experiences for those in different job types (e.g. gender split between office staff vs technical staff)
- Tensions between institutional and departmental levels of decision-making, e.g. staff work in department but are line-managed by faculty or institution. Their participation in culture matters, but cannot always be influenced.
- Moves between departments
- Visibility of, and opportunity for, flexible working (more limited than academics?)
- Effective processes are identifying and promoting staff, and offering training opportunities
- When including them in Athena SWAN, especially SAT, who is best person to include at departmental level?

#### *Pipelines and supporting progression*

Participants in this discussion covered:

- Good practices that might be adopted:
  - Supporting ECRs – double-weighting / less heavy workload – take into account, PGCert commitments; up-front teaching time/other constraints
  - Availability of and information about bridge funding
  - Mentors for post-docs who are NOT their PI
  - Five year plans
  - Research mentoring open to everyone ad hoc
  - Mid-career researchers might need mentoring too, especially for research. Opt-in, not their HOD, appraiser or PI.
  - (Look at) Effectiveness of probation processes and approvals
- Encouraging external esteem indicators
- Mentoring/role models beyond as well as within departments
- Annual meetings for staff with HOD

### **Other resources and advice**

Past applications, action plans, and advice for making applications:

- Via [www.ecu.ac.uk](http://www.ecu.ac.uk) and [www.rgs.org/equalitydiversity](http://www.rgs.org/equalitydiversity)

(Notes from all past Athena SWAN geography network meetings are also at that RGS-IBG link.)

ECU: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/>

RGS-IBG (for disciplinary questions): [rhed@rgs.org](mailto:rhed@rgs.org)

Email lists:

- Athena SWAN Charter members' network: [athenaswan@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:athenaswan@jiscmail.ac.uk)
- Athena SWAN geography: [geography-athena-swan@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:geography-athena-swan@jiscmail.ac.uk)
- Equal Opportunities administrators: [ADMIN-EO@JISCMail.AC.UK](mailto:ADMIN-EO@JISCMail.AC.UK)

Become an ECU panellist: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/get-involved/become-charter-mark-panellist/>