

ATHENA PROJECT

Case Study No 12

UNIVERSITY OF SUNDERLAND

SWAN BRONZE AWARD MARCH 2006

The University of Sunderland joined the Athena SWAN Charter in 2005 and was awarded Bronze SWAN recognition in March 2006. The recognition award is valid until March 2009

THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Sunderland has five schools, responsible for teaching and learning, academic development and research, and working with partners in business and industry. The Graduate Research School provides a focus and catalyst for research, especially in cross-School developments and activities, for research students and as a vehicle for enhancing the level of intellectual debate within the University. The University has strong civic and community links and is, for the seventh year running, the best university for Widening Participation.

BACKGROUND

The University has a significant level of activity on equality and diversity generally and more specifically in SET. It recognises that more needs to be done to further embed gender equality in its practices. Sunderland sees its involvement in the Athena SWAN Charter as a tool to help promote, progress and deliver further advances in SET gender equality. Sunderland is a member of Athena's North East Local Academic Women's Network (LAWN) set up in 2001 with a continuing active programme. The University is also part of a European universities association group looking at the role played by academic women in research, with the aim of sharing good practice.

WORK IN SUPPORT OF CHARTER PRINCIPLES

The University is committed to delivering equal treatment for all regardless of gender, race, disability or contractual status. This commitment underpins the University's approach to staff, students and stakeholders and is incorporated in all its policies, procedures and provisions. At all levels, from small research groups to the University executive, there is a commitment to reduce and to remove gender inequality, by the provision of access, support and development to everyone involved in the University.

Equality for all is achieved through the provision of policies and transparent, validated procedures. These policies and procedures are supported through training and personal development to ensure appropriate application. Senior staff are provided with qualitative and quantitative evidence on gender and equality issues. School conferences and University events focus on diversity and equality. In the School of Computing and Technology all staff are trained in supporting diversity in equality.

Women in senior management and decision making

However, while successful in attracting and retaining women in SET, Sunderland still lacks women in senior academic positions. The University gives particular attention to career progression paths for mid-term academics. As identified in Athena's Report 26 on ASSET 2003, women frequently feel barred from the promotional process because of a lack of research, or possibly confidence in its value. At Sunderland equal importance is given to all three core

academic activities (teaching, outreach and, research with promotion paths from lecturer to professor for all three activities.

There are no formal gender guidelines for most University committees. Examples of current compositions include: Executive Board - 5 women / 11 men; Board of Governors – 4 women / 11 men; Equality and Diversity Group (feeds directly into Executive Board) - 14 women / 8 men.

Equal pay audit

Sunderland has conducted three equal pay audits. The appointment of new lecturers to the same salary point, and a transparency in recruitment, appointment and promotion processes have reduced its pay gap. The University's pay gap reflects the greater incidence of men at the higher ends of the pay scales and of women at the lower, a pattern found generally in HE and the wider UK workforce. The latest pay audit showed significant reductions in pay gaps over the previous twelve months. The gap continues to be monitored and Sunderland aims to reduce it further by a greater consistency in its processes, by the objective use of market supplements and by modernising pay structures to ensure fairness and to reduce long incremental scales.

Recruiting and retaining women in SET

The University has had some success in attracting and retaining women, particularly in computing and technology. Understanding the barriers and ways to remove them are the subject of a research project - *The Existence of 'the Glass Ceiling' in Higher Education and especially in the University of Sunderland*. This has involved surveys and discussions with female academics. The outcomes will be used to inform University policy and approach to supporting mid-career female academics at key career transition points. The data from the research will be available on the University's equality and diversity web site. The research project itself has helped to encourage debate on gender in academic progression and has raised awareness of the University promotion procedures, which state clearly the expectations, reporting and feedback mechanisms.

Promotion

The transparency of Sunderland's promotion by merit process ensures that women can readily identify the expectations, reporting format and feedback built into the process. Individual career planning encourages the setting of goals and objectives. The success of this approach in encouraging women's applications and resultant promotions will be evaluated in 2006 against the statistics from Athena Report 26.

Career Progression

Sunderland seeks to provide an environment which attracts and retains women. It has a long tradition of flexible employment practices, with career breaks, job sharing and hours which allow a sensible work-life balance. Appraisals, which focus on personal development, and enable staff to retain up-to-date competence in their discipline, encourage the retention of women.

Sunderland has extensive training and support in place for post-doctoral researchers. They are encouraged to attend training events that focus not only on research competences, but also on employability and career issues. Women in SET are encouraged to participate in training that enhances their scientific and technical skills, including industry level certification.

Sunderland recognises the importance of ensuring that PhD students develop a career strategy. Support is provided centrally, with training and personal development offered to all PhD students.

School career development support

A recent initiative in the School of Computing and Technology will ensure that researchers participate in activities that are vital for future career success. This initiative includes the development of bid writing groups, who meet on a regular basis. The aim of these groups is to include all researchers within a specific research area (in the pilot – Internet Technologies) in the creation of proposals.

Networks

The involvement of women in SET networks receives considerable support, with women participating at the local, national and international levels. Networking has highlighted the potential of mentoring schemes and Sunderland is currently assessing the potential and practicalities of a formalized approach to mentoring for women in SET.

The lack of female SET role models is being addressed through NELAWN (North East academic women in SET network). Events are planned for women PhDs to meet female SET academics in the region and to raise their awareness of employment and employer opportunities. A mentoring scheme to support the transition from PhD into a sustainable academic career for women in SET is being considered by NELAWN.

Changing culture and attitudes

Sunderland has made significant attempts to transform culture and attitudes over the past decade. These are reflected by

- the high proportion of female academics holding senior lectureships at Sunderland, 40% compared to the UK average of 24%.

- Sunderland having the lowest academic pay gap (5.6%) in the UK.

- In 2004 the ratio of female to male professors was 1:13 across the UK, at Sunderland in 2005 it is 1:4.

Sunderland has dedicated significant resource to the creation of a culture where gender equality is supported by initiatives to raise awareness and understanding and by the application of appropriate policies. This has resulted in the development of transparent procedures which ensure that all staff have access to, and support for, personal development and promotion. A range of work-life balance policies enables staff to work flexibly to meet personal and professional commitments.

Investor in People

As an Investor in People, Sunderland has developed procedures and policies that have impacted physically and socially on the workplace. Many, such as the provision of childcare and high flexibility in working practices, offer women in SET an environment which enables them to maximize their work potential, while maintaining their personal commitments.

Opportunity Now

Sunderland is a member of *Opportunity Now*. This enables them to:

- benchmark their employment practices and activities against national best practice standards

- assess progress towards gender equality and diversity

- share good practice and establish goals.

In the 2004 Opportunity Now Benchmarking Sunderland was awarded silver status. In July 2005, Opportunity Now cited Sunderland as an exemplar organisation for its equal pay audit work.

As a member of the City of Sunderland Partnership, the University is playing an active part in working towards inclusive communities across the city and the embedding of good practice in partner organisations.

THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS

This included data compilation, process review, organisational behaviour analysis and consultation with staff at different stages of the career ladder, with diverse personal lives and a variety of experience in University processes.

The base line and the SET academic staff profile were compiled by HR representatives and departmental administrative staff, who also considered how the University reported, reviewed, benchmarked and used such information.

University career transition processes were considered in terms of the positive support provided to women at key transition points-

- the transparency of the process and its effectiveness in terms of removing barriers
- resource investment in staff development
- current initiatives and future plans to provide greater support for career transition.

A review of the transformational change currently underway at the University focused on ongoing collaborations, attempts and initiatives to change the culture and the gender balance in decision making.

A review of the work-life balance practices implemented at Sunderland considered their introduction, effectiveness and uptake by all staff at all career levels, and plans for future support to ensure a greater work/life balance

Awareness of the Athena SWAN Charter was promoted to female staff. This promotion focused on the principles of the Charter and current best practice, initiatives and plans at Sunderland to attain those principles.

DEVELOPING THE ACTION AGENDA

The involvement in the Athena SWAN Charter will act as a tool to help promote, progress and deliver further advances in SET gender equality at the University of Sunderland.

Further understanding of the barriers to gender equality and ways to remove such obstacles are being considered through a research project - *The Existence of 'the Glass Ceiling' in Higher Education and especially in the University of Sunderland*. The outcomes of this research will be used to inform University policy and approach to supporting mid-career female academics at key career transition points. This data will be made available on the University's equality and diversity web site.

The University is part of a European Universities Association group that is looking at the role played by academic women in research, with the aim of sharing good practice, such as mentoring, and removing barriers to participation and progression. Currently, the University is implementing the improvement plan as presented to this group, which aims to eliminate any discrimination against women caused by long incremental academic scales in the lecturer grades; to achieve a higher number of senior female academics within the institution; and to encourage academic women to aim higher in the institution.

Sunderland will keep its pay practices under review, to check their justification, eliminate bias and maximise fairness. A pay structure based on consistent criteria will be introduced as part of the national Framework Agreement. The structure will provide a rationalised grading process, with fewer increments/grades, which should prevent discrimination against women who take career breaks. The new structure will be monitored to determine whether it does indeed bring transparency and confidence in academic progression.

THE PLAN

SET baseline and academic profile

1. Continue work in Opportunity Now benchmarking exercise to improve gender equality and diversity
2. Maintain and develop Equality and Diversity website in response to policy changes, University initiatives and user feedback

Key career transition points

1. Update researcher and staff development programmes to reflect staff, industry and academic requirements
2. Use national Framework Agreement as a lever to introduce shorter pay scales that are not so intrinsically linked to length of service
3. Review equal pay data each year to check that the pay gap between men and women continues to decrease
4. Review take-up of flexible working practices
5. Implement improvement plan developed within the European Universities Association Initiative (EUAI) focused at the role played by academic women in research, with the aim of sharing good practice
6. Continue review of appraisal and take up of training

Culture change and gender balance in decision making

1. Ongoing staff training programme
2. Equality and Diversity part of School and Service planning processes
3. Training gap identified for Visiting Lecturers and Researchers in Schools with SET activity, to be addressed.
4. Local assessments of activities to check that practices meet policy commitments.