

ATHENA SWAN CHARTER

UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL, DEPARTMENT OF BIOCHEMISTRY

SWAN SILVER AWARD MAY 2007

The University of Bristol, a founder member of the Athena SWAN Charter, was awarded Bronze SWAN recognition in March 2006. The Department of Biochemistry was awarded Silver recognition in May 2007, valid until December 2010.

THE DEPARTMENT OF BIOCHEMISTRY

Founded in 1964, the Department of Biochemistry at Bristol University is one of five medical science departments in the Faculty of Medical and Veterinary Sciences and is one of the most highly rated Biochemistry departments in the UK (RAE rating 5*). The Department has one of the highest per capita research incomes of any department in the university (over £6m a year with more than 150 researchers). Research in the Department is encompassed by two themes: Cell Biology, and Mechanistic and Structural Biochemistry. The Department is also involved in collaborations with other departments in the School of Medical Sciences.

The Department employs 133.5 staff. Women make up 50% of the academic staff body. Approximately one fifth of all first year Bristol undergraduates attend a Biochemistry course. There are 45 PhD students in the department.

BACKGROUND

Bristol University has a SWAN Charter Implementation Group chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Personnel) which provided support and guidance to the Biochemistry Self-Assessment Team. The University also has a Positive Working Initiative strategy which embraces commitment to equality and diversity in the broadest sense.

Staff are actively encouraged to participate in the Athena ASSET Survey, the results of which influence gender action plans at University level.

WORK IN SUPPORT OF CHARTER PRINCIPLES

Knowing the base line and the SET academic profile

Data indicate that female representation in the Department has increased from only 37% in 2000 to 64% in 2006, with the most notable increase being at the more junior levels (graduate and post-doctoral staff). The University acknowledges that work on progression and retention should be targeted at junior levels in order to see a significant effect on the pipeline to senior levels. A link to the University website dedicated to research staff has recently been incorporated into the departmental intranet pages.

As part of the University's annual promotion process, all staff are invited to submit a personal statement and a copy of their CV to the Departmental Promotions Committee (DPC). Academic staff speak to each case at a preliminary meeting of the DPC which considers how the individual's personal statement and CV might be improved, and whether there are any other factors (eg caring responsibilities) which might be taken into account. Advice is fed back to the individual by the academic who presented their case. Revised statements and CVs are then submitted to a second DPC meeting, along with reports on teaching, management and research. Paperwork is then forwarded to the Faculty Promotions Committee if a good case has been made.

Low turnover has provided few opportunities for new appointments. Nevertheless, the proportion of female staff has gradually increased. Wherever possible, short-lists of candidates include both male and female applicants. Including more women on short-lists has been the result of raising awareness of alternative career paths and work patterns. Since 1997 three out of five academic staff appointments have been female, raising the proportion of female academic staff from around 5% in 1997 to over 23% in 2006. Before 2003 there had never been a female professor in the Department. Now there are three female professors in the Department.

Key career transition points

Bristol University introduced a Fixed-Term Contract agreement in January 2005. Since 1999 47 members of staff have moved from fixed-term contracts to open-ended contracts: 57% of these are female.

The Head of Department has monthly meetings to consider the funding of all posts in the Department, particularly those for which external funding will end within 12 months. Any individual at risk of redundancy, is encouraged to place a copy of their CV in a box-file held in the Departmental office. This box-file must be checked for suitable CVs of post-doctoral researchers by any academic staff securing grant funds or preparing a grant application for external funds. Only if there is no suitable CV in the box-file is the grant-holder allowed to advertise the post.

A formal annual Staff Review and Development process identifies career aspirations and explores how these might best be met. It also identifies any barriers to career progression, gender-related or otherwise, and how these might be overcome. The discussions also feed into the processes for redeployment of fixed-term contract staff.

All staff are encouraged to make full use of training programmes, but greater numbers of female staff attend a wider range of courses than male staff. There is a dedicated Careers Adviser for research staff and regular careers workshops are held where senior members of the Faculty talk about career pathways and making the transition to academia. Workshops are also held on alternatives to a lectureship.

All research staff are encouraged to attend the annual Research Staff Conference which provides an opportunity to network with other research staff at the University.

Culture change and gender balance in decision-making

There is little opportunity for staff to network on an informal basis because there is no central social space and staff are based sporadically throughout a large building. The Head of Department has made a particular effort to build personal relationships and create a strong sense of teamwork. Every two years the Department holds a retreat locally over two or three days where all staff come together. The event is planned well in advance to allow those with caring responsibilities to make alternative arrangements to facilitate their attendance. Incoming PhD students are also invited to attend.

The Department has an open and transparent decision-making process. For example, the minutes of the Management Committee (6 men and 4 women) are circulated to all staff and are a standing item for discussion at staff meetings.

All departmental committees have gender balance. The participation of senior female staff on University committees is monitored carefully to ensure that they do not become over-burdened.

All departmental meetings, including research talks (except in exceptional circumstances), are scheduled between 9am and 4pm so that people with caring responsibilities can attend.

Work-life balance practices

The Department supports fellows and post-doctoral researchers (male and female) who wish to work part-time due to family commitments. Part-time workers have secured promotion. If appropriate, working practices are modified for pregnant staff.

The University has been awarded funding from the Wellcome Trust under their 'Value in People' scheme, aimed at those who work, or would like to work, in the area of Biomedical Sciences. This scheme provides a sum of money to the Dean of the Faculty to support individuals during gaps in external funding. Three of the Biochemistry Department's four applications to this funding were to provide salary support to female staff, one of whom was working part-time.

The Department monitors the teaching loads and departmental duties of all academic staff, especially those with caring responsibilities, to ensure that these are not disproportionate. It also enables women to take on jobs that will aid their career progression. An annual audit of teaching workloads across all staff is being expanded to include administrative and research activity. A workload distribution table will be available to all staff.

Champions, responsibilities and accountabilities

One of only two female Heads of a Research Theme in a SET subject in the University is in the Biochemistry Department and female members of staff from the department sit on a broad range of Faculty and University Committees. Female members of staff also sit on journal editorial boards and professional society committees, as well as research councils and research charity funding panels.

Female staff are key contributors to the Department's research profile, speaking at international conferences, as well as holding prestigious fellowships, for example, two hold British Heart Foundation fellowships.

THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS

A Departmental Self-Assessment Team was set up to develop the submission and action plan. Membership comprised 2 men and 5 women, most of whom have or have had caring responsibilities, and included the Head of Department, Senior Lecturers and a PhD student.

Draft proposals for the submission were discussed by the Departmental Management Committee and then at a full Departmental Staff Meeting, providing an opportunity for input and feedback from all staff groups. A later draft was also considered by the University's Athena SWAN Charter Implementation Group, where senior academic staff from across SET disciplines discussed the content of the report.

DEVELOPING THE ACTION AGENDA

The self-assessment team identified a number of areas for further action, for example, on barriers to progression amongst female staff in the Department and whether there should be a mentoring scheme to assist the transition from PhD to academic career. It was also decided that the self-assessment team should continue to meet as the Departmental SWAN Working Party to coordinate implementation of the action plan and provide regular updates on progress to the central University SWAN Implementation Group.

THE PLAN

SET baseline and academic profile

- Improve data collection procedures to ensure that analysis of longer-term benefits of any actions can be determined.

Key career transition points

- Ensure that women throughout the Department are encouraged and supported in applying for promotion as and when appropriate, particularly to professorial level.
- Ensure that staff appraisals include coverage of equality and diversity issues.
- Work proactively to retain staff by reviewing future needs, identifying potential 'redeployees' and encouraging the development of new skills wherever possible.
- Ensure that all job adverts are worded in a way that maximises the possibility that women will apply, including using the SWAN logo.
- Introduce a series of informal events, such as lunches, to encourage networking between junior and senior staff.
- Consider the introduction of an on-line destination survey for research staff and an on-line survey for staff on progression/promotion barriers in the Department/University.
- Consult staff on the development and implementation of an appropriate form of mentoring for staff in the Department.
- Actively encourage researchers to attend training courses.

Culture change and gender balance in decision-making

- Raise the profile of the SWAN Charter by including SWAN as a standing agenda item of committee meetings and ensuring that the Departmental SWAN Working Party meets regularly.
- Ensure that representation on the Departmental Management Committee continues to be from all staff groups with gender balance wherever possible, and encourage female representation on other key bodies, such as the Teaching Committee.
- Recognise that women academics frequently sit on more committees and appointments panels than their male colleagues and, wherever relevant, reduce their other workload accordingly.

Work-life balance

- Encourage all staff to embrace the Positive Working Environment ethos espoused by the University, including the commitment to achieving appropriate work-life balance through flexible working etc.
- Encourage all staff to take their full annual leave entitlement and maternity/paternity provisions; and to adopt flexible working patterns.

Champions and responsibilities

- Raise awareness of SWAN at departmental level, reinforcing commitment to the principles and identifying further activity to reduce inequality and minimise any barriers.
- Support female staff in raising their profile both within and outside the University through encouraging their involvement in key University Committees and their participation in external activity, such as on professional research committees and at conferences.