



British
Geological Survey
NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL



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Athena SWAN: our experience of the Research Institute Pilot

The opportunity to take part in the Research Institute's pilot of the Athena SWAN accreditation process came at a time when Research Councils UK (RCUK) and The Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) had made a firm commitment to the equality and diversity agenda and had published a "statement of expectations" to support this.

The British Geological Survey (BGS) recognised the imbalance between female and male scientists some years ago, and undertook an analysis of this in 2005. As a result, a number of actions were taken- notably the introduction of a very successful mentoring scheme, but the agenda lacked any formal structure or framework against which to measure progress.

When offered the opportunity to work towards Athena SWAN accreditation, BGS was keen to take part, recognising that this would potentially provide the structured framework that it needed to progress the Equality and Diversity agenda (at least in relation to gender equality).

At its first meeting, the newly formed BGS Diversity and Equality Group agreed an action plan to undertake a detailed analysis of our quantitative data on staffing over the past 6 years and to commission a qualitative survey of staff perceptions relating to equality of opportunity within the BGS.

As expected, the completion of the Athena SWAN application form took considerable time and effort. We had some guidance on this as part of networking events organised for the Research Institutes that were involved in the pilot by the MRC, but due to resourcing issues, we were unable to arrange a meeting with an Athena SWAN representative to discuss our own application. We found it difficult to explain the details of who we are and what we do within the word-count available to us, and have subsequently advised Athena SWAN that we feel the form needs some adaptation to allow Research Institutes to provide this information. The data within the form was initially collated by colleagues in the HR team – but was critiqued by scientist members of the Diversity and Equality Group. The application was critiqued and re-drafted at various stages, and this process of drafting, seeking feedback and re-drafting was invaluable.

We had been advised to apply for a Silver Award accreditation, but achieved an assessment that we were "equivalent to Bronze level". The feedback supporting this was thorough, and some of it will be invaluable in refining and further developing our equality and diversity action plans. However, some of it was frustrating as it demonstrated a lack of understanding of who and what we are, which we perhaps could have explained better (but had found challenging within the word count).

From an HR perspective, the Athena SWAN accreditation process has given the equality and diversity agenda a formal platform for engaging staff and managers. By requiring us to analyse our data and staff perspectives on working at the BGS in some detail, the process has engaged a number of our senior science directors (in particular) in wanting to understand and, if possible, address the imbalances that still exist. The feedback from the accreditation team has enabled us to refine our action plan and we are already seeing some real "buy in" to progressing actions.

It is, of course, also slightly frustrating to have had to wait for formal accreditation, and the opportunity to publicise this achievement and use it to engage staff more widely with the agenda. This is perhaps an inevitable part of being involved in a pilot, but we look forward to being able to "blow our trumpet" in the near future!