

Royal Society: John Innes Centre Athena SWAN Case Study

The John Innes Centre (JIC) recognises the value of a diverse workforce and, although Athena SWAN is focused on gender equality, believes that a fair and equitable working environment is key to both a productive workforce and delivery of JIC strategy, and that initiatives put in place to address gender inequality ultimately benefit all staff.

Embarking on the Athena SWAN process was daunting due to the short time frame in which to submit an application and our decision to apply directly for a Silver award in expectation of recognition for existing good practice. This presented an additional challenge in not having a Bronze award action plan on which to build, however, after reading successful bronze and silver submissions it soon became clear that many of the practices taken for granted at JIC were simply not the 'norm'. JIC records were such that we were able to track over the years and provide evidence as to when and, importantly, why relevant initiatives had been put in place and what their impact has been. A series of workshops over the pilot period for participating Institutes was helpful for establishing a framework of approaches being taken.

Surprisingly the major challenges related to data collection and benchmarking. We seriously underestimated the amount of time that data collection, presentation and benchmarking would take. Ironically this was the part of the process expected to be the most straightforward. Ensuring the submission was science led and led by established staff on the self-assessment team (SAT) who could provide a sense check on the information from databases was invaluable. Benchmarking was difficult as the JIC staff roles and JIC science do not map directly to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data; compromises with respect to data presentation therefore had to be made. Having an SAT comprised of scientists provided a challenge when it came to data analysis and having to accept the limitations of imperfect data or interpretations based on small sample sizes! It is important to recognise that Athena SWAN is social science, not analytical science. Unlike many universities, JIC does not have someone whose role is focused on Athena SWAN, and fitting this project on top of full-time work provided additional challenges.

One of the major benefits from this project has been raising awareness of career development, training, networking opportunities and family friendly policies within the Institute. Having the Director on the SAT sent out a clear message to staff that there was support from the top for the equal opportunity agenda. Communication has improved within the institute, focus groups are run on regular basis to ensure staff have input into projects e.g. in developing the Personal Attributes sections of the new appraisal forms. Our commitment to developing all staff regardless of grade or gender is evidenced by the creation of a new post in our training and development team: the appointee has a biological sciences PhD and professional experience of delivering career development training for women in science.

Being awarded a Silver Award was very satisfying and confirmed that JIC culture really does embrace the principles of flexibility that provide for family-friendly working practices, while at the same time demonstrating a commitment to career advancement for all employees. However, it is recognised that, despite the generally positive findings, there is still much work to be done. The attrition of female scientists, particularly at the career transition from Postdoctoral Scientist to Research Leader, is a concern; initiatives have been put in place to begin to address this.

In conclusion, preparing the Athena SWAN application has been very valuable in triggering a comprehensive review of current JIC good practice and in identifying areas for improvement in the ways in which we treat gender issues. This preparation has served as a focal point to accelerate our commitment to gender equality and has resulted in the implementation of new initiatives, aimed ostensibly at women, but which will benefit all staff.

It is critical for JIC's mission to be able to attract, recruit and retain the best regardless of role or gender. This vision of excellence underpins JIC's silver Athena SWAN award.