

Athena SWAN: the NIMR experience of the Research Institute Pilot

The opportunity to take part in the pilot for Research Institutes of the Athena SWAN accreditation process came at a time when the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) had started to implement changes that address issues concerning the Equality and Diversity of scientists and staff at the institute, in particular, the low representation of senior female scientists. Measures were implemented that included the introduction of additional and improved mentoring schemes. The Athena SWAN pilot greatly helped us by providing a formal structure and framework against which to measure our progress. A team of HR staff and scientists were required to thoroughly analyse our data and staff perspectives, which continues to be instrumental in engaging staff, managers and Senior Scientists.

We began work on the Athena SWAN pilot towards the end of 2012, and were excited at the prospect of being one of the first institutes to publicly show our commitment to Women in Science. We initiated regular SAT meetings early in 2013 to formulate a coherent Action Plan, discussing the terms of reference, data, priority areas, delegation of tasks and strategies. An important outcome of early meetings was the creation of a questionnaire, which was distributed to all staff at NIMR. This provided us with data on key unmet needs, which were addressed in our application and by measures featuring in the final Action Plan. The questionnaire results yielded quantitative data, which complemented the collated raw data, giving an overview of relevant NIMR statistics. The questionnaire also provided qualitative data, exploring areas such as culture, which are often not officially documented.

Because limited information was available on how to benchmark our Institute data, which is different to the University experience, we decided to use similar MRC Units and Institutes as comparators. We identified some good examples of staff support at the NIMR, but were also keen to investigate the areas for improvement that emerged from the staff questionnaire. Previous MRC staff surveys helped to identify running themes and trends.

Data for the application were collated by the HR team and then incorporated into the document after careful review. This was facilitated by the existing NIMR HR-Forum, ensuring the effective resolution of institute changes and issues arising.

Regarding the application, we benefited from attending specific pilot days as well as obtaining advice from contacts with experience of the Athena SWAN process, and staff who assess University applications. We endeavored to explain the unique nature of the NIMR within the word limit, including its size, the nature of our research and supporting core structures; and the fact that Research Institutes do not have the breadth of formal teaching, which helps diversify positions and promotional possibilities.

We had been advised to apply for a Silver Award accreditation, but achieved an assessment “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 comments may have reflected a lack of understanding of the culture of our Institute and in particular its commitment and dedication for science of all staff.

Since submitting the application and receiving our accreditation we noted an increased discussion and interest in our Action Plan. Regular SAT meetings are held, and actions outlined in our proposal are steadily implemented. We have taken onboard the feedback from the accreditation team and are starting to incorporate it accordingly to refine our Action Plan. Most importantly, we plan to apply our experience and acquired knowledge to influence the organization and culture of the Francis Crick Institute, which we will join in 2015, ensuring strong support for Women in Science from the start.