

Athena SWAN: the NIMR experience of the Research Institute Pilot

The opportunity to participate in the Research Institutes' Pilot of the Athena SWAN accreditation process came at a time when NIMR had started to implement changes to address issues concerning the Equality and Diversity of scientists and staff. In particular, the Director of NIMR and senior staff had recognized the low representation of female scientists at higher levels and initiated new measures to address this imbalance. This included the widening of the pool for recruitment of tenure-track Programme Leaders, and in consequence the hiring of several female scientists, resulting in a more balanced female to male ratio. Moreover, new mentoring schemes were introduced to support scientists at this career stage. Working towards Athena SWAN accreditation helped NIMR to address issues of Equality and Diversity by providing a formal structure and framework against which to measure progress and to engage staff in understanding and addressing imbalances.

We began to formally work on the Athena SWAN pilot at the end of 2012. A broad range of NIMR staff, representing different stages and types of careers, gender and age readily volunteered to become active members of the Self Assessment Team (SAT). Meetings were initiated in early 2013 to discuss data collection strategies, priority areas and delegation of tasks to produce a high quality application document and Action Plan by October 2013. The chair (Head of Division) and co-chair (Programme Leader), as well as the Head of HR and the HR Equality and Diversity champion formed a core team, who in a very fruitful concerted effort wrote the final application ensuring a balanced representation of science and policy. Pilot days and advice provided by colleagues, who had experience with the Athena SWAN process, proved to be invaluable. A well-received NIMR-wide questionnaire provided quantitative data, complementing raw data collated by HR, as well as qualitative data, documenting less explored areas such as culture. Feedback from this and also MRC staff surveys identified trends and unmet needs that were recognised and addressed in our application.

Since information for benchmarking Research institute data was not available, we took the initiative to obtain data from similar MRC Biomedical Research Units. Despite their small size, the comparison highlighted common difficulties, particularly those related to senior positions for women in science. We made great efforts to explain the distinct nature of a Research institute such as NIMR including (i) its size, which is smaller than most universities, (ii) the diversity of biomedical research performed and (iii) the significance of supporting core facilities and the fact that Research institutes do not have the breadth of pedagogic formal teaching which helps diversify positions and offers opportunities for promotion. Instead institutes measure success by training PhD students and Postdoctoral scientists to take leadership positions in research elsewhere. The restrictions of the form made it challenging to capture the characteristics of research institutes whilst also including the required information and statistics. An application form tailored for research institutes that provides space to include all essential information will be very helpful.

We had been advised to apply for a Silver award, but achieved a Bronze research institute award. The feedback from the panel will be invaluable in improving and further developing our Equality and Diversity Action Plan. Some comments from the panel further underlined the importance of clearly communicating the distinctive culture of research institutes. For example, the information provided in the case studies, an essential feature distinguishing Silver and Bronze Awards, was intended to demonstrate the Institute's flexible approach to supporting young female researchers during maternity leave. The panel comments suggested that this was interpreted as a requirement to work during maternity leave, rather than flexible support provided at the individual's request.

We are delighted to formally announce our Bronze award, and are proud to be the first MRC institute to receive this award. Since submitting our application we have noted increased discussion and interest in our activities. We have continued to hold SAT meetings, and actions outlined in our proposal are steadily being implemented. Importantly, NIMR's experience and acquired knowledge will influence the organization and culture of the Francis Crick Institute, to ensure strong support for Women in Science from the start.