



# **Athena SWAN Biosciences Best Practice Workshop**

**Wednesday 7 March**



# What makes a good Athena SWAN application?

Peter Main  
Head of Physics  
[peter.main@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:peter.main@kcl.ac.uk)

# Athena SWAN: award levels



## Bronze

- 🏆 self-assessment and analysis
- 🏆 identify issues and challenges
- 🏆 plan activities on a solid foundation

## Silver

- 🏆 additional to Bronze
- 🏆 evidence of progress and achievement

## Gold

- 🏆 significant record of activity and impact
- 🏆 beacons for gender equality and good practice



Advancing equality and diversity in universities and colleges



# Personal Reflections

---

- 1. AS certification not the end in itself; the correct mindset is to want to improve equity in the department. AS Bronze, Silver and Gold are just staging points**
- 2. Buy-in from senior management is essential**
- 3. Needs commitment from most (all?) staff to create sustainable change**
- 4. There is no “correct” AS application: departments have different issues so applications should be bespoke**

# Athena SWAN: Process of application



Equality Challenge Unit



## Plan

- Team: skills, experience, knowledge & commitment
- Who does: what, how & when

## Data

- Quantitative
- Qualitative

## Analyse

- Trends & gender differences
- Pipeline & key career transition points
- Link different issues together

## Write

- Narrative
- Action plan
- Consultation & revision

Advancing equality and diversity in universities and colleges

# Plan

---

- **Self-assessment team (SAT) should be diverse (e.g. not 80% women) and representative (i.e. all grades of staff + students) in terms of experience, knowledge and points of view**
- **Someone has to lead process but this person shouldn't be doing all the work. Many SATs have different sub-groups working on different sections of the application (but beware inconsistency)**
- **The SAT has to be embedded in departmental structure and have sufficient influence to elicit change**
- **The SAT has to link with the members of the department, both senior management and the rank and file – nothing should be a surprise**

# Data

---

- **Identify sources (not always easy!) and monitor relevant data all the time (not just for the submission)**
- **Quantitative data:**
  - ensure it is self consistent and present in an intelligible form
  - make it clear which cohort you are referring to
  - if you use %, ensure it is clear what it is a % of
  - give numbers as well as %
- **Qualitative data:**
  - can be collected via surveys; clickers in meetings; focus groups
  - Methods should be well embedded by the time of the application

# Analyse

---

- **Look for significant trends in the data over time (but don't analyse noise!)**
- **Look at transitions – for example:**
  - applications to shortlist to offer to appointment
  - lecturer to senior lecturer to reader to professor
  - UG to PG
- **Golden Rule: Compare data with the stage below (e.g. applications with A-level : PG with UG: Senior lecturer with lecturer) and also compare with benchmarks**
- **Try to link issue across categories (hard!) and to actions**
- **Issues for the Action Plan should emerge from the analysis. Good idea to refer explicitly to specific actions from the narrative (also ensures AP is evidence-based)**



# Write

---

- **Write narrative in good clear English with a logical flow and uniform style**
- **Present data clearly**
- **Analyse, not just describe**
- **Don't try to pull the wool over the assessor's eyes or sound complacent**
- **Leave yourselves time and manage the formal approval process...**
- **...but own the document**

# The framework

1. Letter of endorsement
2. Description of the department
3. Self-assessment process
4. Picture of the department
5. Supporting and advancing careers
  - Key career transition points
  - Career development
  - Flexibility and managing career breaks
  - Organisation and culture
6. Case studies
7. Action plan



Advancing equality and diversity in universities and colleges

# Letter of endorsement

---

- **HoD to show personal commitment with specific examples**
- **Comment on how AS is embedded in structure and processes + any financial support**
- **Refer to departmental + university strategy**
- **Endorse the application as accurate and honest**

# Description of the department

---

- **Be concise: assessors want to know key points without being bogged down by detail**
- **Diagrams are helpful but make sure they are properly labelled**
- **Highlight anything that is unusual. Examples:**
  - New department or recent split/merger
  - Split site
  - Shared studentships
  - Formal arrangements with other organisations



# Self-assessment process

---

- **Provide names, roles and brief pen picture of each SAT member**
- **Give brief details of the *modus operandi* including frequency of meetings etc.**
- **Explain carefully how each interested group in the department was consulted and engaged**
- **Describe how the SAT fits into the departmental structure, where it reports, and how it ensures change occurs**

# Picture of the department

---

- **Present data clearly and critically. Do not simply describe, analyse too**
- **Ask yourself whether the numbers are *reasonable* and reflect**
- **Use benchmarks and link to external trends where appropriate**
- **Ensure data are self consistent**
- **Link issues explicitly to the Action Plan (e.g. see AP1.5.a)**

# Supporting and advancing women's careers 1

---

- **About equity not just promoting women**
- **This is a long section with overlap – try not to repeat too much**
- **Transparency of procedures, particularly promotion, is very important e.g.**
  - Clear criteria
  - Staff are encouraged to apply not just left alone
  - Staff briefings by HoD or Dean
  - Feedback
  - Allowance for maternity leave/special circumstances
- **Provide clear descriptions of policies and procedures at all levels – be honest**

# Supporting and advancing women's careers 2

---

- **Report on male participation and engagement as well as female**
  - Paternity/parental leave
  - Training
- **Ensure flexible working and reduced loads after career breaks are formally included in processes and procedures**
- **Don't forget research data (REF entrants; grant applications etc.)**
- **Assessors appreciate transparency of procedures and data.**



# Organisation and structure

---

- **A fully transparent and balanced workload model (rare!)**
  - AS and similar activities included
  - If it is not in the model, it is not valued
- **How is information gathered about perceptions, including bullying and harassment?**
- **Core hours – give data as well as state policy**
- **Gender balance monitoring**
  - Committee membership
  - Interview panels (cuts both ways)
  - Seminar speakers
  - Who does outreach?

# Case studies

---

- **Only required for Silver**
- **Do not just describe a successful woman academic**
- **Should be a description of how the policies in your department/institution have made a difference to an individual (male or female)**

# Athena SWAN: evidence



## Good applications:

- = Are honest
- = Depend on data reporting
- = Link data, analysis and action
- = Target support
- = Don't make it a 'women's problem'
- = Always ask 'So what?'
- = Include a SMART action plan



**SMART = Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound**

Advancing equality and diversity in universities and colleges

# Action Plan 1: SMART

---

- **S**pecific: Refers to a particular issue identified in the analysis
- **M**easurable: Criteria for success can be measured (qualitatively or quantitatively)
- **A**chievable: Do not promise things that are implausible
- **R**elevant: Should relate to specific issue. Don't invent actions that are not related to issues
- **T**ime-bound: Provide milestones/deadlines. Be realistic and ensure AP is spread across several years.



# Action Plan 2

---

- **State the action**
- **Say why you think such an action is necessary (i.e. link to the analysis)**
- **Say why you think this action is relevant to the issue and likely to make a difference**
- **Say who is responsible and provide dates for milestones, completion etc.**
- **Success criteria should refer to the original issue and be as specific and quantitative as possible**

# Action Plan 3: Bad practice

**Action:** Increase the number of grant applications made by women in the department OK but...

**Rationale:** Support required for academic members of staff making, or considering making grant applications.

Hopeless. Just a statement. No link to data so no idea what issue is being addressed.

**Dates:** Start May 2017 End May 2018

Implausible – would not know in such a short time

**Success criteria:** An increase in the number of successful grant applications made by women in the department

Vague – what rise is acceptable? No link to original numbers

# Action Plan 3: Better practice

---

**Action:** Identify reasons why women make fewer grant applications than men and take steps to increase the number of grant applications made by women in the department

**Rationale:** Data show that, on average, women staff submit 40% fewer grant applications than their male colleagues. Anecdotal evidence from focus groups indicate this is because they have larger informal administrative loads.

**Dates:** Start May 2017: Identify issues and implement plan:  
May 2018: Completion May 2021

**Success criteria:** An increase in the number of grant applications made by women in the department to parity with men.

# Criteria for success

---

## Avoid this type of thing:

- Altered wording in all adverts coming from Department (that is a process not an outcome and no link to “success”)
- Monitor data and analyse progress Ditto
- An increase in the ratio of women seminar speakers (too vague – will 1% do? Link to data)
- Senior management more aware of E&D recommendations (as measured how?)

# Athena SWAN challenges



- = Requirement for robust self-assessment
- = Common reasons for being unsuccessful:



Poor action plan that is not **SMART**

Lack of senior management **buy-in**; team lacks influence

**Descriptive**, rather than analytical narrative

Applications not **identifying** issues raised by the data

Action plan not **targeted** to issues raised

Actions being **process** driven rather than outcome focused

Advancing equality and diversity in universities and colleges

# Questions?

© MARK ANDERSON

WWW.ANDERTOONS.COM



"I don't have any answers. I'm a non-prophet."