

## The Wisdom of Athena: A Model Scheme for Achieving Gender Equity in Science and Engineering in the UK

The gender distribution in science, engineering, and technology (SET) in both academia and industry is unbalanced in the UK, just as it is in many other countries. This means that the underrepresentation of women increases with increasing seniority. The situation persists even though the business world has openly confirmed what seems obvious: Including all sectors of the population is crucial for developing any enterprise to its full potential. In fact, chief executives of global corporations have publicly stated that diversity in the workforce at every level is important. They have identified it as the best way to develop means to expand into new markets and stimulate new business ideas, thus creating a significant competitive advantage. Moreover, a review of corporate performance and gender diversity of 355 U.S. Fortune 500 companies found that “strongest performance correlated strongly with gender diversity in the top management team.”<sup>1</sup>

### Athena Charts a Course

Such information—together with results of the Athena Survey of Science, Engineering, and Technology (ASSET)—led to a new strategy in the UK: establishment of charter to recognize excellence in SET employment in higher education. ASSET was conducted by the Athena Project ([www.athenaproject.org.uk](http://www.athenaproject.org.uk)) and compared the experiences of more than 6,500 men and women in academia and research council institutes.

The idea for a charter emerged from the Scientific Women’s Academic Network (SWAN) Conference in October 2002, where 10 founding members committed themselves to “the advancement and promotion of the careers of women in science, engineering,

and technology in higher education and research, and to achieve a significant increase in the number of women recruited to top posts.” Since then another 16 universities and research institutes have joined the charter. To help achieve its goals, Athena works with partner universities to develop, share, encourage, and disseminate good practices to improve career development, recruitment, and participation and, ultimately, to increase the number of women working in SET at all levels.

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### What Charter Membership Means

A university that applies to become a member of the Athena SWAN Charter

pledges to accept and incorporate the following principles into its action plan:

- To address gender inequalities requires commitment and action from everyone, at all levels of the organization.
- To tackle the unequal representation of women in science requires changing cultures and attitudes across the organization.
- The absence of diversity at management and policy-making levels has broad implications, which the organization will examine.
- The high loss rate of women in science is an urgent concern that the organization will address.
- The system of short-term contracts has particularly negative consequences for the retention and progression of women in science, which the organization recognizes.
- There are both personal and structural obstacles to women making the transition from Ph.D. into a sustainable academic career in science, which require the active consideration of the organization.

The university as a whole, i.e., the top-level administration, must support the



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charter’s intention and thus accept the preceding principles. On a practical level, this commitment involves submitting a report that describes the statistics and self-evaluation of the university with regard to employment practices over time. The report should also include potential areas and procedures for improvement, as well as specific plans for how to implement changes and improvements. Once bronze-level Athena SWAN status is granted, individual departments or colleges can apply for higher-level awards (i.e., silver or gold).

### Benefits for All

A report released by Athena summarizes the potential advantages of joining the charter, which include the following:

- To be recognized as an employer of choice, attracting and retaining talent
- To enhance the organization’s external reputation, including the public relations and marketing opportunities offered by gaining an award
- To help fulfill statutory equal-opportunity responsibilities
- To identify and publicize initiatives that exist but are not known outside the department concerned
- To stimulate change at organizational and departmental levels
- To receive individual, expert feedback when submitting annual reports and recognition awards
- To have the university’s achievements profiled positively on the Athena SWAN website
- To gain access to the charter’s network of contacts and events
- To underline the institution’s commitment to gender equality to students, funders, research councils, and industry

To find out whether institutions indeed experienced these advantages, I wrote to some of the universities that have held Athena SWAN awards. The response was unanimously positive. For instance, the University of York, whose chemistry department holds a rare gold-level award, confirmed that its expectations—wanting to recruit the best staff and create an environment allowing them to undertake their best research—were met. It confirmed that the Athena SWAN process:

- Is a useful toolkit for identifying weak points in staffing policies

- Identified good working practices for all (i.e., not just for women)
- Was a useful and effective recruiting tool
- Identified areas in which more support was needed and made departments look at their processes and policies to identify gaps
- Raised the profile of the departments involved

The University of Edinburgh similarly confirmed that the important benefit was “for all staff, not just female staff, because any action that is taken affects all staff equally. Discussions about the award and the process towards making the application for the silver award led to a structured review of how the school operated, what barriers there were to effective delivery by all staff, and action plans to start to dismantle the barriers. The award was a good vehicle for organisational development within the school, and a number of very simple actions made a real difference.”

### Watch for Progress

The formal process of participating in the charter recognizes the self-reported and externally monitored performance of an institution with regard to gender diversity, the identification of means to change practices that create barriers for the advancement of women in particular, and other cultural changes. Thus, it may be one way moving forward to address systemic problems that contribute to the disproportionate representation of women in SET.

The charter is only a few years old, and it will take more time to measure how much of a cultural change it can effect. However, I for one will “watch this space” carefully and try to convince my institution to join this scheme. The EU provides clear directives to support principles like Athena’s, but a crucial added value of the Athena SWAN charter is the credibility and visibility provided by external monitoring. Should this scheme prove successful, it might provide an excellent model for other countries to consider. ■

—*Inke Nätthke, Women in Cell Biology Committee*

### Reference

<sup>1</sup>Catalyst. (2004). *The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity*. New York: Catalyst. [www.catalyst.org/file/44/the%20bottom%20line%20connecting%20corporate%20performance%20and%20gender%20diversity.pdf](http://www.catalyst.org/file/44/the%20bottom%20line%20connecting%20corporate%20performance%20and%20gender%20diversity.pdf)