

Being a member of an Athena SWAN assessment panel

The London Mathematical Society strongly supports advancing women's careers in university mathematics departments. The LMS Women in Mathematics Committee has developed a Good Practice Scheme with the aim of supporting mathematics departments interested in embedding equal opportunities for women within their working practices. The Scheme provides specific support for departments working towards Athena SWAN Award status. Athena SWAN Awards recognise success in developing employment practices to further and support the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) departments in higher education.

I have been a member of two Athena SWAN assessment panels in March and June of this year. Both panels had an odd number of members, consisted of academics and administrators (usually from Human Resources), had both female and male members and guidance from two members of Athena SWAN. When considering applications from departments, one of the panel was a subject specialist, i.e. when considering an application from a Mathematics department one of the panel is a Mathematician. Here I outline what the panels I have experienced like and dislike.

General Comments

- Ensure that the self-assessment committee is balanced, has female and male members and includes a member of the department's management team. The panels felt it was very important that the senior management team of the department were seen to be *fully engaged* with the process (and be represented on the team). It is important that if the committee recommends changes in departmental procedures that there is someone with the seniority to see that this happens.
- The panel is sent copies of the applications in black and white, so colour diagrams are not as effective and in some cases were quite difficult to read. If you want the panel to consider a colour version of your application, then you have to send the relevant number of copies of it to the Equality Challenge Unit. The panel is also sent an electronic version of the applications which a member might print in black and white regardless.
- The panels felt that ideally the Head of Department letter should talk about a *strategic vision*, but essentially none of them did!
- Don't make the diagrams, tables and data analysis highly technical and complicated. Not all members of the panel are necessarily numerate!
- The panels really wanted an *honest assessment* of where the department is and were not happy if they thought applications were trying to hide something or were just too complacent.
- For *Silver awards*, the panels looked for activities that had been happening for a period of time (years), with *measurable* effect.

Self-assessment

- Analyse your data *honestly*. The panels liked (and commended), applications that were very honest in their assessment of the current situation. If in your self-assessment of the department there is a major issue then say so and use the Action Plan to show how you're going to address the issue.
- Be consistent when comparing your data to that of other departments in your discipline. Either compare your data to the national average, or compare with a set of comparator universities (with reasons). For example, members of the Russell Group (or the 1994 Group) might compare themselves to other members of the Group, to the Group average, or to the national average.
- The data does need to be complete and well presented – and then (very importantly) there needs to be *honest reflection* on what the data is saying, what the *key issues* are and what *actions are proposed* to try and address the issues. The panels really liked an application that referred to the action plan in the main text.
- If there are different groups within the department of different natures then the data should be separated out for each group.

Organisation and culture

- A diagram of committees and reporting structures was seen to be a *good thing*. Some departments had committees, e.g. promotion and research, entirely made up of male professors that made key decisions – this was *not liked*. Careful placing of women on important strategic committees was *liked*. This is particularly important for departments with very few women.
- Recruitment: give the gender percentages for applications, interviewed and appointed. If there are issues, what are your strategies for addressing them?
- Promotions: give the gender percentages of applications and success. How do you identify, develop and mentor women for promotion?
- Having Athena SWAN activities recognised in workload planning (for all the self-assessment team) would go down very well. It was thought that the chair [of the Athena SWAN committee] should have a similar allowance to chairs of other major department committees – but it was not clear that this happened very often.

Flexibility and managing career breaks

- Can staff request flexible working, e.g. ‘family friendly lecture times’ (such as no 9am and/or 5pm lectures)?
- Are all departmental meetings in ‘core hours’ (e.g. 10am-4pm)?
- Many departments had informal flexible working/paternity leave without anything being requested formally.
- Keeping in Touch days were mentioned a few times but there was not much description of how these were used to help the woman’s career (rather than just help the department!).
- University funded schemes to assist those returning from maternity leave were particularly *liked*.
- Does your department have procedures for giving those returning from maternity leave reduced teaching and administrative loads? Examples include: reduced teaching loads for a period after returning from maternity leave; 6–12 months with no teaching after returning from maternity leave; making appointments to cover the teaching of people on maternity leave (rather than saying that it was covered by existing members of the department).
- The panels were keen to hear about staff taking paternity leave.

Other Comments

- The panels wanted departments to be thinking *pro-actively* about how to recruit more women members of staff. Just adding something to advertisements (“We particularly welcome female applicants ...”) or having one woman on an interview panel was *not* really seen as sufficient. Examples of good practice include:
 - * LMS Good Practice Scheme supporters can show their support for the scheme on their homepage.
 - * Look at the images on your department’s homepage and in publicity material (e.g. student prospectus). What message do they give about gender participation in the department?
 - * Circulate job advertisements widely, use academic networks and mailing lists, e.g. European Women in Mathematics.

Action Plan

- The panels felt that most of the action plans were *too vague* – they wanted *concrete, realistic targets*. There was an acceptance that if figures were already above the national average then a realistic target might be just to maintain this.

For further information about the LMS Good Practice Scheme see
<http://www.lms.ac.uk/women/good-practice-scheme>

A Good Practice Scheme Workshop will be held on 31 October 2013 where participants will be able to hear about and discuss the process of applying for Athena SWAN. Details are available on the website.

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