action for opportunity
Academic Opportunities Committee report | 2005
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1. **INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND**

The Academic Opportunities Committee (AOC) was established in 1998 as a Rector’s Advisory Committee to: create/ensure a ‘level playing field’ for women academics at Imperial College by removing barriers that may exist in appointment or career advancement, and to ensure that the numbers of such qualified women in the College are as high as possible.

Some seven years on, the AOC has reviewed its achievements and identified areas for future action. The AOC is working to ensure that the College builds on a firm foundation to take change forward.

**Section 1.** Covers what Athena has identified as the key components to improving women’s academic career progression and representation in science.

**Section 2.** Reviews College successes against the Athena ‘standard’.

**Section 3.** Explores the issues identified by the review and ways in which they might be addressed.

**Section 4.** Sets out the AOC’s immediate action plans and recommendations for the future.

This report recognises the achievements and successes to date in improving women’s academic career progress in Imperial College London. It flags the issues that need to be addressed for Imperial to build on its achievements and continue this success. Immediate actions proposed by the Academic Opportunities Committee are described in the action section of the report.

The AOC is working to ensure that the College builds on a firm foundation and structures to take change forward. The AOC is reviewing ownership of the changes that have been achieved, to be clear this is broad enough for future and continued success.

Priority actions are intended to maintain momentum while the College community as a whole, and in particular the intended beneficiaries, debate the issues raised. This will enable the College to develop a longer-term strategy in order for Imperial to achieve an open and inclusive working environment in which all its academic staff can sustain enjoyable and rewarding careers.

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1 The aims of the Athena Project are to advance and promote the careers of women in science, engineering and technology (SET) in higher education and research and to achieve a significant increase in the number of women recruited to the top posts. Imperial is one of some 60 UK universities who have worked in partnership with Athena since its establishment in 1999.
2. THE ATHENA ‘STANDARD’

The AOC review drew on the work and findings of the Athena Project and the three key components to improving women’s academic career progression and representation in science, specifically:

- Senior management commitment, building on previous work and establishing the base line (statistics and surveys). This requires significant involvement of, and senior management commitment, at the highest levels of the organisation. This gives visibility and credibility to achievements, and widely communicates interest and support.

- Supporting career progression, the appointment and promotion procedures, and providing positive career support to women academics - mentoring, networks, and role models.

- Succeeding – making sustainable changes, the organisational and workplace structures, processes, and culture. A firm understanding of the baseline, repeating surveys and monitoring, and reporting on a regular basis. This provides the basis for measuring success, reviewing progress and determining next steps. It also helps sustain interest and keeps the issue of women’s career progression, retention, and representation, on the management agenda.

3. SUPPORTING CAREER PROGRESSION

Work by the Athena Project has identified the importance of establishing an understanding of the differences (in reality and perception) of men’s and women’s preparation for, and approach to, job applications and promotion. This is a first step in making the procedures, practices and criteria fair and open, and in enabling women to position themselves to compete equally with men.

Athena’s work has also shown that the provision of support on an institutional-wide basis, and within the local workplace, is particularly important to women who are approaching or considering the following key career steps:

- the move from post doc to first lecturer
- a career break and returning to work
- a professorial appointment

Women who question their own abilities, particularly at the post-doctoral stage, may as a result, expect to be treated differently (unfairly). Developmental activities and programmes can: encourage women (and men) to stay and progress their careers in SET; help clarify career goals and strategies for success; prepare women to create and take advantage of opportunities for career enhancement; and provide the access to role models, shared experiences, career advice and support that men more often obtain from their departments/divisions, principal investigators and research group leaders, but that women do not always otherwise get.

The introduction of mentoring programmes opens up discussion of the issues of women’s career progression. In a relatively short timescale, mentoring is effective in helping to equip women early in their careers with the support, self-awareness and confidence needed for a successful career. There is something uniquely powerful about the one-to-one mentoring relationship.

The support, encouragement and activities that networks offer their members make small but significant differences to their working lives, and helps to develop a greater understanding of how to progress a career in SET.

4. SUCCEEDING

Targets on appointments and promotions feature largely in many Universities’ HR Strategies. Proposed Athena targets for universities include the following:

- Short term: The percentage of female applicants for academic posts to reflect the percentage of women at the level immediately below (in their own institution and/or the “pool” of institutions where they usually recruit).
- Medium term: The percentage of newly-appointed/ newly-promoted women in academic posts to reflect the percentages at the level below.
- Long term: The percentage of women at each career level to reflect the percentage at the level below (including the undergraduate intake).

Evidence has shown that improvements are likely to remain individual and short term unless accompanied by culture change at organisational and workplace levels. Successes owed to the persistence of individual women are not sustainable. Without senior men and woman as active champions, the organisational processes which underpin science and decision-making are not likely change.

For organisational change to become accepted, a clear understanding of the potential benefits by all involved, and who will be affected by the process, needs to be communicated. A tripartite approach is necessary, with senior managers working with Heads of Departments/Divisions and senior academics (who lead by example in determining the workplace culture), along with women in SET, who need to expect more of their department/division and College.

Family friendly/work-life balance policies and procedures are of no avail if they are not taken up, either because of the culture of the workplace or because few staff know about them.

For change to become embedded, there needs to be a proper structure with a multi-disciplinary committee composed of SET academics, senior managers, planners and HR, equal opportunities/diversity and staff development representatives, and, importantly, individuals who sit on ‘main university committees’.

To succeed, the committee driving the change has to make sure the action agenda moves forward; smooth the path through the system; act as a sounding board and test pilot proposals; champion and publicise the changes; and ensure no one or no group is ignored or left out. It is useful to identify and resource individuals to ‘champion’ specific initiatives, and to make links, both internally and externally.

Athena’s ASSET (Athena Survey in Science, Engineering and Technology) findings suggest there is much more to do before women perceive themselves to have the same level of support, encouragement and development opportunities as their male colleagues. There is much for departments/divisions to organise and influence, and at organisational level there needs to be clear expectations, reporting and feedback mechanisms.
5. OVERVIEW OF COLLEGE ACTIONS

The establishment of the AOC is itself a clear indication of senior management interest, as is the College being a member of Opportunity Now and taking part in its regular benchmarking. The Chair of the Equal Opportunities and Diversity Committee is a ‘champion’ of Opportunity Now, and the Rector gives public support to Athena and the now well established annual Imperial Athena lectures.

An early AOC action was to commission an independent report to inform its future priorities. The Kay Scott report, which focused on communication, and the perceived lack of support for women staff, provided the basis for the AOC’s year one action plan.

In 2002, the College commissioned external consultants to undertake an equality audit. The survey findings were informed by significant responses from female academics, the results of which were published in the report Imperial College – a good place to work? A follow up equality audit is planned for 2006.

In 2004, the College commissioned a report from the Athena Project which benchmarked the College against the Russell Group Universities who participated in the 2003 Athena survey of male and female scientists working in 23 UK universities.

The AOC receives regular reports from Faculty Principals on departmental/divisional good practice and actions to be progressed. Imperial, through its participation in Athena’s programmes, networks with other UK universities active in this area. The College’s track record of creative and practical initiatives compares well with other Universities. Imperial is seen by Athena as an exemplar for other, later starters.

6. ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

Since 1998, the AOC has achieved much, with a succession of initiatives and reviews of College policies and practices. As a large multi-campus organisation, the College has benefited from the AOC’s high level membership, ability to drive through policy, and keeping women in SET a priority on the management agenda.

As a result of this latest review, the AOC has recognised the importance of consolidating its successes and ensuring that this commitment, and its successes are visible internally to both men and women, and externally, for instance, to women considering a career move to Imperial.

For the College to achieve an open and inclusive working environment in which all its academic staff can sustain enjoyable and rewarding careers, it is important for the College as a whole, and in particular the intended beneficiaries, to debate the issues raised in this report. The AOC is well aware that for Imperial to retain its leading position, it will need to break new ground with one, or more, significant practical initiatives.

The AOC recognises that despite all the activity, the message is not getting through to all individuals; much of what remains to be done is rooted at departmental/divisional level; the open welcoming face of College needs to be more ‘up front’ and personalised.

The AOC sees the need to be more active as champion and publicist; develop a mechanism to assure groups and individuals that they are included in its considerations; broaden its membership, and/or set up working groups to tackle specific issues. These changes would:

- Enable input from women at early and mid career stage
- Improve the AOC’s communication with departments/divisions, faculties and potential beneficiaries
- Bring ownership of the changes to departments/divisions and help their embedding
7. TAKING ACTION

Further developments will include the following actions:

**Improving Communications and Profile**

- Set up a dedicated web site that, first and foremost, is the resource that female academic staff consult when they would like information about College policies, procedures, activities and events. The site would also invite participation and include information on the AOC, the particular interests of individual members and which aspects they champion.

- Additional information on the site would include case histories of female staff who have benefited from schemes such as Elsie Widdowson Fellowships, Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowships, the Rosalind Franklin Award, Royal Society Research Fellowships, etc.

- Produce a new version of ‘Voices of Imperial Women’ (2) which features women who contributed to the first edition.

  (2) Publication of booklet sponsored by Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine. The booklet is a collection of various material related to how women scientists view their role and their future.

- Celebrate success stories.

- Continue to work with AWAIC (Academic Women at Imperial College), and any other existing or new networks, to help communicate, champion and promote ownership of actions that are being taken.

**Supporting Faculties and their Departments/Divisions so that they can Support Female Staff**

- Provide good practice guidance on how departments/divisions can best handle maternity leave/career breaks, requests for flexible working, and which draws upon the many examples currently in place.

- Provide networking support for those women who have been appointed, promoted or who have returned to College from maternity leave/career breaks.

- Provide “role” guidance so that each department/division can appoint its own designated “female academic contact” whose contribution should be recognised and resourced.

- Provide Faculty Principals and Heads of Departments/Divisions with guidance on their responsibilities to provide support to female academic staff, together with a “good practice checklist” that identifies activities/procedures etc. that should be in place within each department/division.

- Offer career planning seminars for men and women who are considering career breaks.

**How Will We Measure Success?**

- Continue to monitor the appointments, promotions and pay review processes, analyse the results, investigate any perceived anomalies and take action as required.

- Use focus groups to get views from female academics, identify key issues that affect them, and take action as required.

**Review the College against Athena’s short, medium and long term targets**

- Members of the AOC will visit Faculty-based meetings to discuss the actions that are being taken in each faculty, and their departments/divisions, in order to implement and audit the “good practice checklist” and any issues that have arisen.

- Faculty Principals will be asked to provide an annual report on departmental/divisional progress.

- Benchmark the College against other universities, both national and international.

**Marks of Success**

In June 2005, Imperial became a founder member of the Athena Swan Charter. The AOC will put in place a programme that will aim to gain College and individual departmental/divisional recognition, eg silver and gold SWAN Awards, over the next five years. This programme will drive action forward and will allow College and departments/divisions to measure progress objectively, and to benchmark progress with other UK universities.

To recognise efforts to support good practice, in 2006 the College is introducing awards that recognise excellence in leadership and management, mentoring, and equality and diversity. It is envisaged that successful actions that support female academics will feature and will gain awards.
8. CHRONOLOGY OF SUCCESSFUL ACTIVITIES

1996
- Publication of “Voices from Women in Science” by the AWISE group

1998
- College established the Rector’s Committee on Academic Opportunities - the AOC

1999
- Commissioned a report “Academic Progress of Women at Imperial College”
- Joined Opportunity Now

2000
- Established Elsie Widdowson Fellowships for female academic staff on return from maternity leave to help them focus upon an agreed research programme
- Successfully bid for an Athena Project Award “Might Mentoring Help?” to pilot a mentoring scheme for women; the scheme was subsequently rolled out to men and women
- AWAIC established

2001
- Established the Annual Athena Lecture addressed by a distinguished external speaker on a relevant theme (see below for list of speakers)
- Undertook a survey of senior academic women (following a similar activity undertaken by MIT)

2002
- Winning a Royal Society Athena Award for the work of the AOC
- Targets to increase the percentage of female academics and researchers introduced into the HR Strategy
- First College-wide staff survey undertaken “Imperial College - A Good Place to Work?”
- College’s first equality and diversity specialist appointed

2003
- Compulsory training introduced for all those involved in recruitment and selection and make up of interview panels monitored
- Harassment and Bullying Policy and the informal, confidential support network introduced
- Equal pay audits introduced
- The College was one of 23 universities that took part in the first ASSET survey
- Contributed to Athena’s UK good practice review for the DTI
- Introduced the College’s Pledge to Academic Women

2004
- Changes made to the Academic Promotions process and best practice activities and approaches incorporated
- Commissioned ASSET Survey Imperial and Russell Group Benchmark Report
- Department of Chemistry participated in the Royal Society of Chemistry and Athena joint review of good practice
- Unveiling of the artwork commissioned by the AOC to celebrate female scientific endeavour (paid for by some of the prize money awarded to the College when it won the Royal Society Athena Project in 2002)

2005
- Implementation of dedicated career support provision and mentoring for research staff - part of the College’s response to the Roberts Report
- Department of Physics invites the Institute of Physics to undertake an audit
- College becomes a founder member of the Athena SWAN Charter

The Annual Athena Lecture Speakers:

2001 • Professor Lottie Bailyn, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
2002 • Dr Catherine Cesarski, Director General of the European Southern Observatory
2003 • Professor Dame Lesley Rees, University College London
2004 • Dr Sue Ion, Executive Director of Technology, British Nuclear Fuels Limited
2005 • Professor Wendy Hall, University of Southampton
2006 • (coming up) Baroness Onora O’Neill, Principal Newnham College Cambridge and President of The British Academy
9. College Statistics (Women Academics)

Professor
Academic staff grades analysis by gender 1999 - 2005

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Senior Lecturer
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Lecturer
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Researcher
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