

Editorial

Athena SWAN 2020 - Countdown to Silver

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Abstract

I began working as the NDS Athena SWAN Coordinator in September 2019, a little over a year before our next Athena SWAN submission was due. As we enter the new year, I thought I'd take the opportunity to give an update on our priorities as we look ahead to November.

The Athena SWAN charter was introduced in 2005 to recognise higher education institutions and departments that have done good work in the advancement of gender equality. NDS is proud to hold a Silver award, which is due for renewal in November 2020. To earn that award, the department needs to demonstrate the impact of its efforts to improve the inclusivity of its policies, culture and initiatives. The work done to earn the award is largely undertaken by the Self-Assessment Team (SAT), which works to fulfil the department's Athena SWAN action plan.

There is a great deal of data underpinning the rationale behind the Athena SWAN Charter and the department's work in this area. Women currently account for 13% of consultant surgeons in the UK¹, with recent figures showing women comprising 45% of academic staff but only 22% of professors². It is therefore

unsurprising that as an academic surgical department, NDS struggles to achieve gender parity in its academic and clinical staff. However, it is notable that 32% of doctors in surgical training in 2017 were women³ and 48% of students earning postgraduate research degrees were female⁴. There is a pattern in academia and surgery in which fewer women are progressing into senior roles that has come to be referred to as the 'leaky pipeline' of science⁵; this pattern is repeated within NDS's researchers, as shown in Figure 1.

This lack of representation of women in senior positions and the 'leaky pipeline' that has caused it is one of the main issues we aim to address through our participation in the Athena SWAN Charter. As we prepare to renew our Silver award, 2020 is shaping up to be a busy and exciting year. Our first priority has been to become familiar with the new renewals process

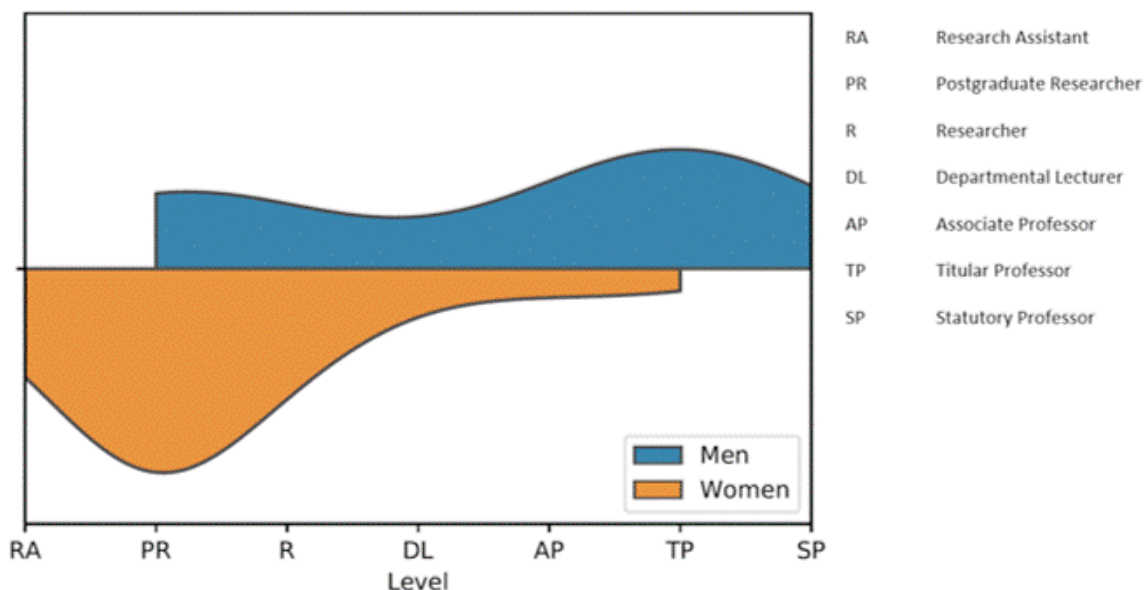


Figure 1 - Chart showing the proportion of men and women in research roles in NDS.

announced in December 2019. This new process will likely mean a change in the way we run our Athena SWAN SAT meetings, analyse and present our data, and track our progress against our action plan.

Over the next year, we will be working to identify ways in which we can support members of the department who have experienced or witnessed bullying and harassment, with a view to eradicating the issue altogether. NDS has a zero-tolerance policy on the matter and wants everyone to feel valued and supported, so any instances of bullying or harassment are unacceptable. This will require more investigations into incidents of bullying and harassment, reasons behind under-reporting, and ways to better support people who come forward to report it.

We also have plans to re-launch the department's mentoring scheme. We believe that NDS's greatest asset is its people, and we want to invest in them! We know from previous surveys that of the people who have received mentoring in our department, 90% found it useful. We hope that by reintroducing and promoting mentoring, we can develop a culture of self-development and opportunity within the department so members of staff feel they can thrive at NDS.

Another focus for the year will be health and wellbeing. Working in academia presents challenging and stressful times, and we want to make sure that all staff and students in NDS have all the tools they need to manage those stressful periods and balance their work with their mental and physical health. At the department's 2020 Away Day, Mark Bellamy's wellbeing workshop, "Thriving in a Messy World" proved popular. We saw a response rate of 75% in the survey handed out in that workshop; because of the level of interest generated, we'll be using the workshop as a starting point in launching a pilot programme within the department that supports members of the department with their wellbeing.

Once our renewal is submitted, we'll be looking at our long-term goals and evaluating our strategy. We hope to take an intersectional approach to equality, diversity and inclusion and will be working to increase the number of BAME and female members of staff in senior positions within the department. A common challenge in academia is the loss of female and BAME talent along the career pipeline, and this is something we are continually working to understand and change. We want opportunities in the department to be offered in the most fair and accessible manner, so we'll continue to evaluate the inclusivity of our policies and procedures and the methods we use to assess performance.

We're thrilled to see that 94% of staff would recommend working at NDS to a friend and 99% feel supported by their colleagues. Hopefully, these numbers will continue to increase as a result of our work. As we look to the future, we're looking forward to continually improving the department and our working culture and, as always, we're looking forward to the continued support we receive in our efforts from the entire NDS team.

Conflicts of interest

None.

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