

# ATHENA PROJECT



## The Athena Project 1999 to 2007 - Making a Difference

Based on a presentation made by Caroline Fox, Advisor to the Athena Forum at the American Association for the Advancement of Science Annual Meeting in Boston February 2008, at a joint seminar with the the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE Program, and Science Foundation Ireland's Institute Development Award Program - *Looking Across the Ocean: Increasing Science and Engineering Women Faculty in the United Kingdom, the United States and Ireland.*

### Introduction

The presentation describes key aspects of the Athena Project, which was set up in 1999 to make a difference to the career progression of women in science in UK universities.

The people, the members of the Athena Committee, who 'made' the Athena Project, where they positioned Athena, and why it was different from other UK women and science initiatives.

The way Athena made a reality of its aim

*To advance and promote 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 in the UK*

was by working in partnerships with universities and leading professional and learned science societies. This work identified, developed, encouraged, disseminated, celebrated, and measured the good practice that made a difference to women progression in academic science.

Athena's achievements - some 80 UK universities (over 70% of those with any significant science faculties) took part in one or more of Athena's programmes. Athena kept women's career progression in science on the agenda of university management. The project focussed on what could be done, the good practice that was in place and working in universities and science departments. Most importantly Athena removed the excuses for not doing anything. Athena's reports and case studies provided examples of good practice, and Athena's Surveys of Science Engineering and Technology (ASSET) provided hard evidence on which action could be based.

Athena's legacy, what is in place for the future and what still needs be done to achieve Athena's aim.

## **The People who ‘made’ the Athena Project**

Athena's Steering Committee were, in the main, distinguished women scientists, who were personally committed to Athena's aims. They had worked in the right places, they knew the right people, and were more than prepared to use their influence, connections, and personal networks, on behalf of Athena. As a group, and individually, the committee created, recognised, and took opportunities, and they recognised, celebrated and cherished the successes of the groups and organisations with whom they worked.

What none of the committee had was time to waste on bureaucracy, or standing on ceremony. And, their steely determination ensured that Athena did nothing to take the responsibility for action away from those who held it, the professional and learned societies - the science policy and decision makers, and universities as employers, and the gatekeepers to serious science careers.

What the committee wanted was action, not research. Before Athena was set up in 1999 considerable energy had gone into identifying the issues and the problems of women's career progression in science; but much less into taking 'practical' action to address them. Given that Athena's initial funding (from the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) and the Office of Science and Technology at DTI) was for just four years, Athena needed action and success in a short time frame.

## **Why Athena was different**

The Committee's own power base was the science community. The problem of women and science lay within the science community as a whole. The delivery of change had to be via that community, science had to own the changes that were necessary, and if science did not own Athena, the project was not going to work. The committee knew how easily scientists could demolish, steam roller, or just ignore initiatives which came from central university management, from HR, equal opportunities, diversity or staff development.

The committee had seen a lot of 'worthy' schemes, which had engaged early career women scientists, had taken their time, but had not changed the system, challenged the culture, or made any lasting changes to the workplace environment. So, Athena engaged with Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors, Deans of Science, Engineering, and Research, and senior university managers. Athena appealed to universities and scientists competitive instincts. It became a niche brand, recognised and valued by Vice Chancellors and for women scientists it gave a national validation.

Athena made a difference, it gave leadership. Athena was successful. It was independent, and free to deliver what its committee saw was needed. The committee listened to experts, colleagues in the scientific bodies, universities, and departments, who were at the leading edge of good practice. Athena disseminated what it learned from its partners, published reports and disseminated good practice through the network of individuals, universities and departments who took part in Athena's programmes.

## **The focus of Athena's work**

The Athena Committee did not want to reinvent the wheel, nor did it want what Athena had worked for to disappear when the project ended. They needed to be sure that the changes made by universities and departments would not unravel, as people moved on/changed jobs. But, first, Athena had to identify, the good practice that was 'out there', before it could encourage, disseminate, or celebrate it. And, Athena had to ensure its legacy – the task could not be completed within the lifetime of the project.

## **Identifying, Developing and Encouraging Good Practice**

In practical terms, quick wins were needed, to develop and then to consolidate the Athena 'brand'. The project had ring fenced funding from the HEFCE for grants to universities. For the first two years competitions were held, open to all UK universities, for good practice development grants. The grants were small (the largest was £10K), the universities that received them had to commit matched funding, and their Vice Chancellors were asked to endorse their bid, with a statement as to how what was proposed would contribute to the universities' academic missions.

### **Year one university development grant projects 1999/2000**

Seven universities ran women's mentoring, networks and career development programmes. The projects made, and continue to make a difference to the individuals, both men and women, and to the universities which took part, and to others who learnt from them. They gave Athena its first good practice case studies to disseminate, they showed what could be achieved in a year, and built grass roots support for Athena.

### **Year two university development grant projects 2000/2001**

Having occupied the lower ground - supporting women in a man's world, Athena's sights were raised - to changing the culture. The five universities awarded development grants, choose to do this through changes in key processes - promotions and committees. The networks that evolved through the year one projects were so successful that they were continued and new ones were funded. The networks adopted the name coined by one of them – 'Athena Local Academic Women's Networks' (Athena LAWNs), some of them are still active in 2008.

The university projects involved some 15 very different universities (from an HE College to the 'golden triangle', and from Plymouth to Saint Andrews) and the universities who received the development grants became Athena's ambassadors. They provided a support network for each other, and role models for other universities who were interested, but uncertain where to start, what to do, and how to do it. Some of the universities also made major contributions to Athena's successes later on.

Athena's first two years showed how small, simple changes could make a difference. Individual changes were low cost, other than in people time, but built together they started to influence the processes and cultures of academic science. The development projects were successful but effectively emptied Athena's coffers.

## **Celebrating, Disseminating and Measuring Good Practice**

The Royal Society stepped in with three years core funding and office space for Athena. For two years, 2002 and 2003, Athena celebrated and disseminated good practice with its Royal Society Athena Awards.

In 2003 the Office of Science and Technology, DTI, asked Athena to report on the state of good practice in UK universities, to complement the Athena's *Guide to Good Practice 1999 to 2002*. The guide was Athena's first formulation of the good practice approaches that worked, arrangements which encouraged good practice, and the commitments and leadership from university and departmental management that were necessary if good practice was to become embedded, and cultures changed.

For the DTI report a check list was designed, based on what Athena had learnt from the work of its partner universities. The checklist, completed by 28 universities, showed that at university and senior management level the 'right things' were being done, the policies were in place, however, follow up discussions, almost universally showed how little certainty there was at university, senior management level about what really happened in departments, other than that the picture would be patchy.

Athena recognised that the professional societies were the key to accessing departments and influencing behaviour in the workplace; so started work with the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) and Institute of Physics (IOP), both of whom were already actively engaged with women and science programmes.

Athena adapted its university good practice checklist, for a joint project with the RSC, which explored good practice in 25 UK chemistry departments. The resulting report on Good Practice, published in 2004, identified (three) key performance indicators for science departments, based on previous work by Athena, the RSC, and the good practice identified in chemistry departments. The indicators flagged the areas where action was needed if departments wished to become and remain employers of choice, and to provide an environment in which men and women could enjoy successful, sustainable and rewarding careers in science.

## **Providing Evidence - Athena's Surveys of Science, Technology and Engineering (ASSET)**

In 2003, Athena had a small sum left from its HEFCE development money; not enough for another development grant round, but which could only be spent in grants to universities. One of Athena's first networks, at the University of East Anglia (UEA), had undertaken a survey of post docs to provide hard evidence for their Vice Chancellor on the differences in men's and women's career progression. They raised extra funds, and their survey was professionally run and reported, by the university's survey office. The following year another university ran a similar survey as part of their project, and then asked Athena for funding to run a comparative survey in another university. The proposed outcome did not really justify the cost, but the idea was attractive. The problem was solved by the University of Bristol who had recently developed a web based survey for post docs. Athena used this as the basis for its ASSET survey of SET academics. Grants to Bristol to develop and run the survey and to UEA for the analysis of the results used the last of Athena's HEFCE funding.

The 2003 survey covered male and female scientists in 23 universities. The 2004 survey covered 17 more universities (and five UK's Research Councils), with a third open access in 2006, Athena had evidence of the views, experiences and expectations of the career progression of over 13,000 scientists and engineers working in the UK, including some 9,000 plus in higher education and research.

### **Recognition of Good Practice - Athena SWAN Charter and Award Scheme**

One of Athena's local networks (LAWNs) tweaked the terminology to SWAN - Scientific Women's Academic Network. SWAN won a Royal Society Athena Award in 2003, for its interdisciplinary cross institutional network and its proposed National Charter for Women and Science. In 2004 Athena was offered European Social Fund support by the recently established UK Resource Centre for Women and Science (UKRC), to develop what became the Athena SWAN Charter. The Charter was launched in 2005, with ten founder university members included Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial and University College London. The first SWAN awards were made in 2006.

### **Athena Legacy – Athena SWAN Charter**

SWAN now receives core funding from UKRC and the Equality Challenge Unit where it is now based). Membership of the Charter continues to grow, as do the number of applications for SWAN recognition awards .

### **Athena Legacy – Athena Forum**

The Athena Forum's mission is 'to provide a strategic oversight of developments that seek to, or have proven to, advance the career progression and representation of women in SET in UK higher education and research.' The Forum will be the expert voice from within and for the science community. The Forum will, while exploring gaps and challenges, focus on identifying and commending national and international excellence in supporting women in STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine).

### **Athena Legacy – Athena Survey of Science Engineering and Technology (ASSET)**

The potential value of ASSET for the STEMM higher education and research community was recognised by the Royal Society, who committed to work with the Athena Forum to publish further reports on findings from the surveys and to evaluate the use of the findings. Based on this work, the RS and the Athena Forum will decide whether and how future ASSET surveys might best be run to maximize participation and the use of the results to influence policy and action at both national and employer levels.

Note in 2009 HEFCE awarded a project grant to Imperial College London, partnered by the Royal Society, to secure the further development and future of the survey. The next survey runs in January/February 2010

Athena Project Reports and Case Studies are all available on [www.athenaforum.org.uk](http://www.athenaforum.org.uk)