

Reflections on furthering gender equality



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I became aware of what is now Advance HE's Athena SWAN scheme in 2008 and suggested we use the process of chartering for an award as a way to examine objectively gender equality in my department. We received our first award (Silver) in 2009, reflecting good practice that was already in place, and committing to a plan for future action. We renewed Silver in 2012. Looking back, engaging this early meant that we were working out what gender equality was all about at the same

time as preparing submissions and devising our next action plan. The light dawned when we worked out that gender equality really meant women and men should have exactly the same opportunities, be free to make exactly the same choices, and that this was happening. Our size, around 100-120 people, was an advantage. This is small enough to nurture a good sense of community which meant our surveys and activities were well received, and large enough for variety and to measure impact.

Along the way I learnt that changing culture takes time but can be broken down into stages. We aligned with Kotter's established 8 step scheme (others are available), and ensured that we spent the time to fulfil each step, and eventually repeatedly cycling through the last few steps if something had not worked and as we tackled new inequalities of which we became aware. We developed a vision that was so simple that everyone understood it, even if they did not know anything about gender equality, and nor could anyone reasonably object to it. Our vision and mantra is still #simplygoodpractice. We followed the evidence, whether quantitative or qualitative, and devised actions to change anything that was not supporting equality or best practice. Importantly, we found that as we improved things for

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those who were under-represented, we improved things for everyone, although of course those who were disadvantaged benefitted more.

By nature, I am an optimist, and enthusiastic and strategic about important things. I used this to plan and push for innovation in our activities and to share what we were doing with others, to spread good practice by giving talks and leading workshops. This recognition by others meant we kept pushing forward. We were also very keen to think differently, try new things and assess their impact. These activities and attributes underpinned

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our work and ensured that we made steady progress. We were awarded Gold in 2016, the first department at UCL to be recognised at this level.

In recent years we have really enjoyed pushing at the boundaries to deliver equity. We have continued to do innovative work (such as Life of P.I.). We received Gold in 2020 and have an ambitious action plan to keep us moving forward, with gender equality now just one part of our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion work as a department.

Early on, I wanted to deliberately model what we were trying to achieve, so I invited a male co-Chair and ensured that the committee was gender balanced and represented all types of employee and student in the LMCB (Laboratory for Molecular Cell Biology) as well as eventually covering as many other protected characteristics as possible as we extended beyond gender.

Out of the experience of leading the LMCB in its equality work I was competitively appointed UCL Provost's Envoy for Gender Equality in 2018, which now allows me to contribute to and influence gender equality work across UCL. Extending the principles of collaborative leadership used in the department, I set up the new UCL Gender Working group with three co-Chairs (to cover most protected characteristics as well as senior academic and professional support staff). Our work is still evolving and we seek to work with, and challenge, senior management and the whole institution to



Sara receiving the Gold Athena award from Sir Paul Nurse, Athena SWAN Patron, in 2016.

advance and deliver UCL's gender equality priorities, integrated with our wider equality work. This includes continuing participation in the Athena SWAN charter, profiling and sharing good practice, resourcing initiatives, considering and addressing issues of multiple disadvantage, and championing necessary change. Co-operative leadership is challenging in that it requires more effort behind the scenes, but working to our strengths means that we make faster progress overall as well as sharing the workload, and it is more satisfying because again we have to model good practice. UCL now has 39 departmental Athena SWAN awards, the most of any UK University, and including three Golds. Our departments have engaged at different times, with those engaging early generally showing the most progress. I support our central EDI team and work with the Athena SWAN manager to lead on gender equality and its intersection with multiple disadvantage, especially race, strategically. At the same time, we are supporting departments and local equity

leaders to take our EDI work forwards at grass roots level.

I am engaged with the national and international Higher Education sector. Notably, I had the privilege to share my experiences with the governance committees for Canadian research enterprise as they developed their own comprehensive 'made in Canada' equalities charter (Dimensions), now piloting. I have set up a special project with one of UCL's international partners, the University of Tohoku, Japan, so that we can learn from and help each other in our goal to achieve full gender quality. The current travel restrictions have forced us to turn what would have been several exciting face-to-face activities into a longer lasting, and possibly further-reaching, online project, which of course is **#simplygoodpractice**. I should perhaps close with saying that all this is on top of my academic life and research into the children's neurodegenerative disease, Batten disease.