School of Mathematics and Physical Sciences
Equality and Diversity Newsletter

The bluebells are out, we’ve had a few very warm days, and it’s time to bring you another edition of the newsletter from your Equality and Diversity Committee. We are one year from our Athena SWAN submission (the chartermark recognizing commitment to advancing gender equality in the sciences) and that also means we’ll be stepping up a gear in some of our activities to put together our application in the coming months. We will be seeking your help in terms of gathering data about your opinions on the school – more details in due course.

Our activities and other items of interest are also outlined in this quarterly newsletter. You can also find more details about us at the SMPS E&D webpage:

http://www.smps.reading.ac.uk/equality-diversity/

If you want any further information or there is anything you would like to raise please email Joy Singarayer (j.s.singarayer@reading.ac.uk) or Calvin Smith (calvin.smith@reading.ac.uk).

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1. PhD student peer support session

By Hannah Gough and Eunice Lo

Last term we organised a welfare focused PhD group seminar. The session was titled ‘Finding help with the less academic aspects of PhD life’, and was a collaboration from two members of the Equality and Diversity Committee (Hannah Gough and Eunice Lo), Kate Fradley (Peer Supporter) and Vivienne Hill (from Counselling and Wellbeing). The session aims were to highlight the wide range of support available to students, encourage peer support at the everyday level, and disperse some of the awkwardness associated with mental health.

The meeting started with an animated version of the support network diagram Hannah and Eunice have presented to the E&D committee and a discussion of the outcomes of the Met focus groups for wellbeing. One of the major themes highlighted by the focus groups was the impact on their mental health and wellbeing due to heavy workloads and unpredictable deadlines. The stresses of academia were also linked by some to imposter syndrome.
The group was given signposting to the different types of support available, for example, peer support, charities, NHS, and RUSU based services. A short set of slides was included about peer-support on an everyday level. Hannah and Kate highlighted the importance of training they had completed on essential listening the previous year through a few reflections.

The meeting was then passed over to Vivienne who spoke about the range of backgrounds at the counselling department, some of their services including the life skills courses, and concluded the meeting with a short group exercise. The group exercise involved pairing up and taking it in turns to listen and talk. The group was then asked to reflect on what was different between listening and talking, what was valued in a listening, and what was hard about it. Feedback after the meeting was positive, as it was seen as a refreshing change, even if not directly useful at the time. It seems appropriate to run a similar session every year based on this.

2. Vegan lifestyle from an E&D perspective

By Clare Smith (with initial investigation by Kim Oakley)

Equality and diversity isn't just about race and gender, vegan lifestyles are also protected under the ‘religion or belief’ characteristic in the Equality Act 2010. It is therefore a prohibited conduct to discriminate, harass, or victimise someone for vegan beliefs.

A vegan eats no animal products or by-products, so, e.g., no meat, fish, dairy, eggs or honey (See http://www.vegansociety.com/). People become vegan for different reasons, some of which are:

- **Compassion:** the sad fact is that male animals have no value in the production of milk and eggs resulting in the slaughter of male animals soon after birth. Similarly female animals are slaughtered at the end of their productive lives, less than a quarter of their natural lifespans.
- **Health:** Less saturated fat, more of your five a day, avoidance of dairy/egg allergies.
- **Environment:** A vegan diet requires about a third of the land and water resources needed for conventional Western diets.

Harassment can sometimes be a problem, usually in the form of jokes, but sometimes more unpleasant. If you think that vegans are all hippies without enough strength to pick up a lettuce leaf check out this website to alter your preconceptions: http://www.greatveganathletes.com/bodybuilders

These days veganism is becoming more mainstream, which makes following a balanced vegan diet much easier, with many dairy substitutes available and several chain restaurants offering vegan menus. The university is reasonable
at catering for vegans, providing vegan food at their food outlets and for events on request. If you're arranging a meeting and providing cake or biscuits then, in order to cater for the greatest number of people, you might want to consider choosing one of the following easily available treats that are currently suitable for vegans and also contain less allergens: Oreos, Lotus Biscoff, HobNobs, Rich Tea (Sainsbury's Free From Rich Tea biscuits are also gluten free), Lazy Days Rocky Road & Belgian Tiffin (gluten free). If you're catering for vegans some easy options are falafel, houmous, and Linda McCartney sausages and quarter pound burgers.

3. The Annual Morley Seminar

School Annual Lecture series is named after Edith Morley, who was the first woman appointed a University professor in the UK, in 1908 at University College, Reading (which became the University of Reading).

Our speaker this year is Professor Susan Solomon, Ellen Swallow Professor of Atmospheric Chemistry & Climate Science at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) - see Professor Solomon's biography and her background information. The seminar will be held at 2 pm on Wednesday 25 May 2016 in the Madejski Theatre in the Agriculture Building, and is open to all.

Prof. Solomon will be talking about: Meeting the Scientific and Policy Challenges of the Antarctic Ozone Hole: A Global Success Story

4. Talking E&D at York

Calvin Smith and I (Joy Singarayer) were invited to the Chemistry Department at the University of York on 28th April for discussions around equality and diversity, and to give a seminar. Their department is well known for being at the forefront of advancing diversity issues and to that end they have held a Gold Athena SWAN award for several years. Indeed, they lived up to their reputation, and from the moment we arrived (After a very long train journey…) there was a feeling that diversity and inclusion is a strong part of their identity, that staff and students are very engaged in a range of activities, and they are implementing some really great ideas.
We were invited to give a talk as part of their ‘Chemical InterActions’ seminar series. The topic of our talk was our experiences of developing and delivering student focused Unconscious Bias training. This is something Calvin and I have spent the last six months working on, and we now have experience of delivering such sessions to undergraduates and postgraduates. As noted by one of their key professors involved in E&D, we are one of the first schools/universities to include student focused Unconscious Bias sessions (a lot universities have started to do this but predominantly for staff) and York Chemistry department were interested to hear about what we chose to include in the sessions and what we have learned from our initial experiences. Our seminar received considerable interest and the Q&A afterwards also highlighted some interesting points and ideas.

5. Video resources for teaching diverse students

Across the UK, women and ethnic minority students can face issues that make higher education more of a challenge. Here at Reading, we are aware of the statistics and we are thinking how we can play our part in making higher education fairer. Hilary Weller has assembled a collection of short videos with expert and practical advice and insight on some diversity issues in further education in the US (which has some of the same challenges): http://www.met.reading.ac.uk/~sws02hs/teaching/diversity/

This is aimed at teaching staff but it would be great if other staff and students can get involved. Please watch the videos and join in the discussion at https://twitter.com/ using the hashtag #UniRdgDiverse (you will need a twitter account). Or email your comments to Hilary at h.weller@reading.ac.uk or to diversity@reading.ac.uk, letting them know whether you would like your comments to be made public (on twitter), either anonymously or attributed to you.

6. Computer modelling of real workplaces with more women

Studies show that greater levels of female participation in the workforce result in economic benefits for companies. However, small biases and workplace structures can work against women reaching the top jobs. Women are most likely to leave jobs because they don’t feel challenged, because they aren’t being paid enough, and because they don’t feel like they’re being provided with opportunities to succeed (found in a 2016 study by the International Consortium for Executive Development Research).

Paul Gaudiano of Icosystem, a predictive analytics firm, suggests that it is still hard to pin down the optimal ways to improve gender balance for corporations. Icosystem has recently developed an agent-based computer model that simulates the complex
workings of any given organization by simulating the behaviors and interactions of individual employees and the impact that could have on various aspects of the organization. With this sort of software tool different policies, strategies, and behaviors can be tested to see what emerges in terms of gender balance, economic impacts, and so forth, to find the best ways to make advances. All issues of capturing the sophistication of agents and validating the models aside, these sorts of models are increasingly being used in a variety of applications from economics to land use, and application to equality and diversity issues is certainly very interesting.

The source for this piece can be found at: http://motherboard.vice.com/read/this-sims-like-software-models-real-workplaces-with-more-women-icosystem

7. Smile to reduce your bias

Research shows that when we see members of groups that are not our own it can activate a basic threat response in our amygdala. This ‘us’ and ‘them’ tendency may have provided survival value long ago, but is less useful and even damaging in a modern context. Minorities who experience the negative effects of bias and/or discrimination can face many difficulties, including adverse health consequences (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4100718/).

Can we minimize or change our biases? The answer to this is multi-faceted and something we are working on in the E&D committee from many angles. Importantly, neuroscience research increasingly shows how plastic the wiring in our brains is. For example, experiments seem to show that when we smile or watch video clips that make us feel happy our biases are reduced (e.g. when participants were induced to smile, by holding a pencil in their mouths, while looking at a set of Black and White faces they showed less implicit bias on a subsequent test of racial attitudes). This suggests that, in addition to other measures, we can apply powerful personal and simple approaches (as simple as a smile!) to reduce our bias when we know we have important decisions to make. It also suggests that enhancing our working environment to increase the wellbeing of everyone in SMPS could help us all make better and less biased decisions.

8. New mental health services

There have been many stories in the news recently about mental health issues within academia and the University has a well-established support system for students run out of the Student Wellbeing Office [http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/counselling](http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/counselling) but it also has invested in a new support system for staff called “Confidential Care” (part of the Employee Assistance Programme) which launched earlier this month. This is an independent, free & completely confidential 24x7 service offering support to staff on a range of issues (taken from website):

- Health and wellbeing advice and information
- Telephone counselling;
- Face to face counselling;
- Counselling & emotional support;
- Everyday matters;
- Debt & financial management;
- Legal and tax advice;
- Family care;

This service replaces the old arrangement with First-Assist (you may have credit card style reminders of this service).

Further details including how to access this service may be found here: [http://www.reading.ac.uk/closed/humanresources/workingatreading/humres-EmployeeAssistanceProgramme.aspx](http://www.reading.ac.uk/closed/humanresources/workingatreading/humres-EmployeeAssistanceProgramme.aspx)