



Brief Report on Reviews of Athena Swan

7 March 2022

Athena Swan in Ireland

The objective of the Advance HE Athena Swan Charter Framework is to support higher education institutions, academic departments, and professional units in impactful and sustainable gender equality work and to build capacity for evidence-based equality work.

MU was the first Irish institution to apply under the expanded version of the Athena Swan charter that includes Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines as well as Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine. It also incorporates intersectionality, taking into account the numerous factors that can overlap with gender inequality, including the intersections between gender, race and ethnicity. The underrepresentation of men where relevant, is also considered.

The introduction of the Athena Swan Charter to Ireland in 2015, represented the first structured national framework approach to work on EDI in higher education institutions. Adopted from the UK where it originated in 2005, it has subsequently been adopted/piloted in Australia, Canada, India, and the USA. The European Commission now requires every research organisation to have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) to be eligible to apply for funding under Horizon Europe, and through its CASPER project, is currently looking at the creation of a new European certification/award system for gender equality (GECAS) in research organisations (including potential transfer of Athena Swan accreditation at national level). In Ireland, higher education institutions (HEIs) are required to apply and retain institutional Athena Swan certification as part of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Strategic Dialogue requirements linked to core grant funding, and eligibility to apply for research funding from Irish research funding agencies (e.g. SFI, IRC, HEA) is also linked to institutional Athena Swan certification.

The [Athena Swan Ireland charter](#) has recently undergone a re-development in line with the findings of a national consultation (see 1.2 below) and offers a framework for progressing equality in higher education and research that is unique to Ireland but aligns broadly with the global charter principles.

The new charter framework, introduced in October 2021, has further adapted the previous expanded charter framework to the Irish HEI context and takes a comprehensive multi-level approach to organisation structural/cultural change across the equality grounds enshrined in

Irish legislation. This includes national drivers and links to core grant and research funding, and European Commission requirements for Horizon Europe.

The new framework aims to reduce the administrative burden involved in the Athena Swan process through streamlined data sets and clarification where benchmarking / consultation is required, and a new shorter renewals process. Applicants are asked to consider the resourcing and recognition of EDI work within the application process.

1.1. Evaluation of Athena SWAN in Ireland undertaken by the HEA

In 2019, the HEA conducted an evaluation of Athena SWAN 2017-2020 ahead of renewing the agreement with Advance HE until the end of 2023. The findings of the HEA evaluation¹ indicated that Athena Swan accreditation is the key driver of gender equality in Irish higher education institutions. Also, in a survey run as part of the process, 94.3% of those who responded to the question “Do you think that the Athena Swan Charter helps to raise awareness of gender equality issues in Irish higher education institutions?” answered in the affirmative. Furthermore, the open text responses included a number of positive appraisals of the importance of Athena Swan in relation to the advancement of gender equality in Irish HEIs, however workload and lack of resources remain an issue across the sector. In relation to additional supports for Athena Swan that respondent’s thought were required, the main themes arising centred on the need for more easily accessible and nationally benchmarkable staff data, the need for extra resources within HEIs for Athena Swan applications and the need for the substantial time commitment involved with an Athena Swan application to be factored into workload allocation models.

1.2. Irish consultation on Athena Swan undertaken by Athena SWAN Ireland

Athena Swan Ireland held a National Consultation during 2021. The consultation received 616 responses and approximately 30,000 words of qualitative feedback. The majority of respondents (71%) were from universities, and 53% of respondents were academic staff.

74% of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that *‘the Athena SWAN process has helped to raise awareness of gender equality issues in my institution’*. Qualitative feedback also noted positive changes as a result of Athena Swan, including:

- increased awareness of the issues around gender equality among staff leading to greater visibility and discussion;
- improvement in gender balance in student recruitment, staff appointments and promotions;
- core hours and improved work-life balance;
- policies around maternity leave including returnee grants and provisions for new mothers;

¹ Correspondence received from HEA

- new policies, procedures and EDI units;
- significant changes observed go beyond gender equality to include other equality characteristics.

The consultation results demonstrated that Athena Swan in Ireland is helping to provide language for staff to name and identify gender-based inequities, and a framework that helps identify and address issues.

1.3. What has changed? - Key stats for Ireland

There are currently 88 Athena Swan award holders in Ireland (87 Bronze, 1 Silver)². 19 institutions (universities, institutes of technology and colleges) hold awards, as well as 69 departments. This data reflects awards made up to and including the April 2021 assessment round. *MU holds an Institutional Bronze and 5 Department Bronze awards.*

- **Leadership:** *We now have 6 female Presidents/Provosts of Higher Education Institutions (2021) of 18³ (33.3%).*
- **Governance and Management Structures⁴:** *Six out of seven universities (Dec 2020) have a minimum 40% representation of women/men on both their Academic Council and Executive Management Teams compared to only 1 out of 7, and 2 out of 7 as at December 2015, respectively.*
- **Professors:** *In Ireland, 27% of Professors are female (2020) compared to just 19% (3-year average 2013-2015). In MU, 34% of our Professors are female (2020)⁵. She Figures 2021 indicated that in 2018, just 26% of grade A positions (full professorships and equivalent) in the EU-27 were held by women⁶.*
- **At European level,** *Ireland is recognised as a ‘strong innovator’ and a ‘role model in the implementation of Gender Equality Plans’⁷. Ireland ranks 7th in the EU on the Gender Equality Index, scoring 73.1 out of 100 points (EIGE, 2021)⁸.*

Ireland has taken a multi-level approach to shifting the dial on gender equality with investment by the state (e.g. set up of the HEA Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality, Senior Academic Leadership Initiative - €3.4m for new and additional Professor posts over 3 years, Gender Equality Enhancement Fund - €500k/yr for advancing gender equality initiatives in Irish higher education), investment by institutions (e.g. appointment of Vice-Presidents for Equality & Diversity in HEIs), and a focus on individual responsibility to help

² <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/international-charters/athena-swan-ireland/award-holders>

³ This is based on 7 universities, 3 TUs, 7 IoTs and RCSI with 6 of these institutions having a female President/Provost (MU, TCD, UL, GMIT, IT Carlow and MTU).

⁴ <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/statistics/>

⁵ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/07/Higher-Education-Institutional-Staff-Profiles-by-Gender-2021.pdf>

⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/rtd/shefigures2021/index.html>

⁷ *European Research and Innovation Advisory Committee Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation (ERAC SWG GRI)* assessed the adoption of Gender Equality Plans in 23 member states and 6 associated countries (2021).

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/strategy_on_research_and_innovation/documents/ec_rtd_she-figures-2021-country-fiche-ireland.pdf

change culture with training & development resources for staff and students (e.g. consent classes, bias awareness training, how to become an active bystander).

2. International reviews of Athena Swan

While not a direct comparison to our adoption of Athena Swan in Ireland, it is also useful to consider reviews of Athena Swan outside Ireland.

2.1. Review of Athena Swan in the UK

The [UK based impact review of Athena SWAN conducted by Ortus Economic Research and Loughborough University](#)⁹ found that:

- 70% of higher education providers in the UK have engaged with the Athena SWAN Charter. (The majority of those that have not engaged are speciality arts schools.)
- The charter is most effective as a tool to ensure that practices and policies present no disadvantage to any member of staff or student, targeting cultural change.
 - 93% of 'champions' believe that the charter has had a positive impact on gender issues in their university, department or research institute
 - 78% believed the charter had a positive impact on equality and diversity issues
 - 78% believed the charter had a positive impact on the career progression of women.
- When compared to departments/institutes with a silver or bronze award, women in 'gold' departments/institutes are more satisfied with career progression processes and flexible working practices.
- Strong evidence that the charter processes and methodologies have supported cultural and behavioural change – not just around gender equality, but equality and diversity in all its forms.
- A wide range of impacts around gender balance have been reported. These include an increase in the number and proportion of women in academic and research posts, from the most junior to the most senior, though there is evidence that such impacts can take time to materialise.
- Considerable challenges which threaten ongoing engagement, including resource requirements and lack of leadership support.
- The amount of work required to deliver a compelling application is seen as unnecessarily burdensome.
- Significant problems faced in acquiring, analysing and reflecting on the required data with the workload overall being a very significant overhead.
- Participants perceived some issues with the assessment process including the limitations of a paper-based review and the need reduce the amount of time input required for panels, to provide more consistency of assessment and to blend consideration of written material with visits to departments and institutes in order to facilitate a more rounded assessment.

⁹ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/impact-evaluation-athena-swan-charter-2019>

- In submitting departments, there is a trend towards promotions to senior lecturer/reader and associate professor becoming more gender balanced over the period leading up to submission. At departmental level, there is also a trend towards an increase in the percentages of women shortlisted and appointed.

2.2. Review of Athena Swan in Australia

The [‘Science in Australia Gender Equity \(SAGE\)’ independent evaluation of the introduction of Athena Swan into Australia](#)¹⁰ found:

- Over the past three years, the SAGE pilot has been successful in initiating new conversations on Gender Equity and stimulating coordinated action to effect broad change across the higher education and research sector.
- It was the right decision to run a SAGE pilot of the already tried and tested UK Athena Swan Charter in Australia as it facilitated timely implementation of the framework. However, the lack of customisation created challenges unique to the Australian context including difficulty addressing indigeneity and intersectionality.
- Specific change initiatives reported included: less talking, more doing; major reviews in some organisations – already resulting in totally changed culture, policies, committees, diversity, etc; development of multi-faceted promotion measures; initiating and fast-tracking family-friendly policies – leave arrangements, improving work-life balance for all higher education and research staff, etc.

3. Summary

Athena Swan accreditation has been identified as a key driver of gender equality in Irish higher education institutions. Concerns around workload have resulted in calls for the time commitment be factored into workload allocation models, for more resources across the sector, and for easily accessible and nationally benchmarkable staff data. Athena Swan Ireland has recently re-developed the Irish Framework to reduce the administrative burden involved in the Athena Swan process through streamlined data sets and clarification where benchmarking / consultation is required, and a new shorter renewals process. Applicants are asked to consider the resourcing and recognition of EDI work within the application process. Overall, Athena Swan is seen as a useful framework to support HEIs in impactful and sustainable gender equality work and to build capacity for evidence-based equality work across the equality grounds enshrined in Irish legislation.

For further information: www.maynoothuniversity.ie/edi

¹⁰ https://www.sciencegenderequity.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SAGE_Report_44pp_SCREEN.pdf

